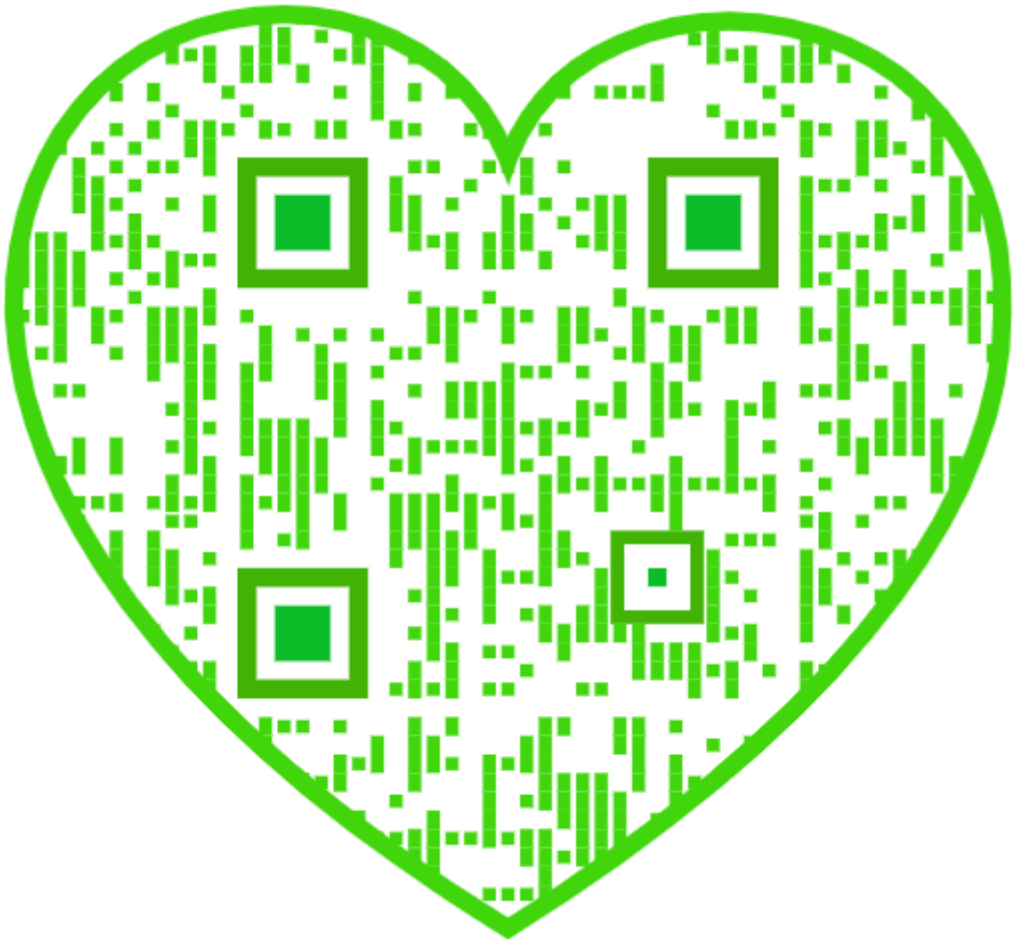
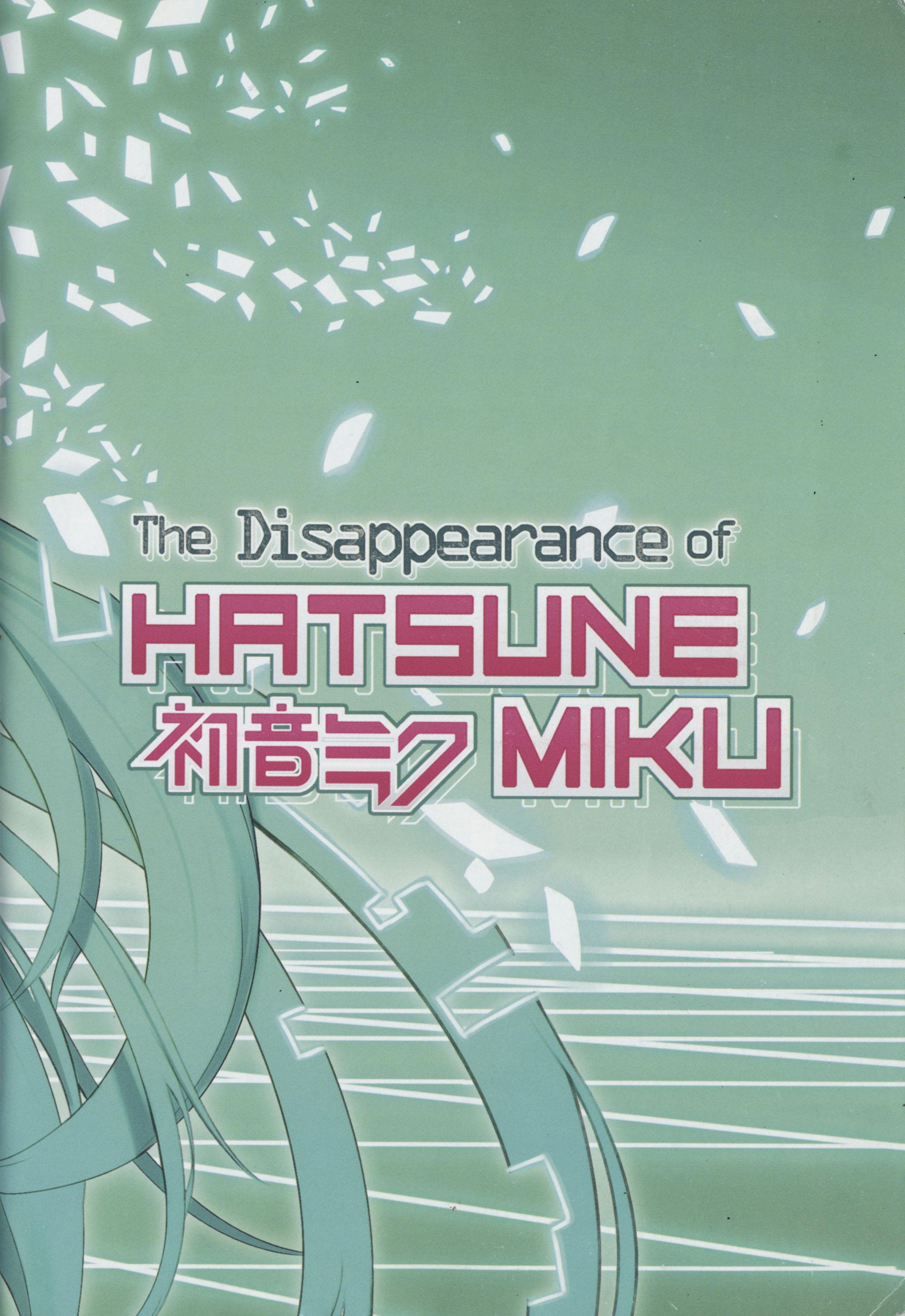
The Disappearance of
HATSUNE
初音ミクMIKU
STORY BY Muya Agami AND cosMo@BousouP
ART BY Yūnagi

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THE DISAPPEARANCE OF

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Seven Seas Entertainment

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THE DISAPPEARANCE OF HATSUNE MIKU

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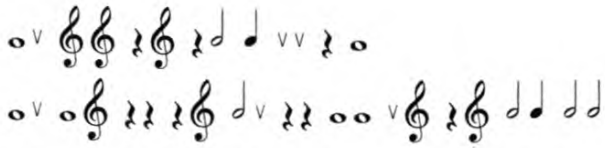
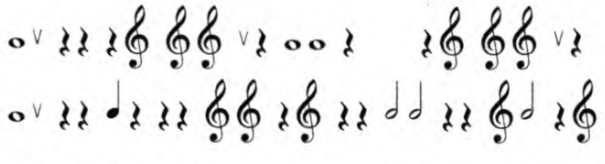


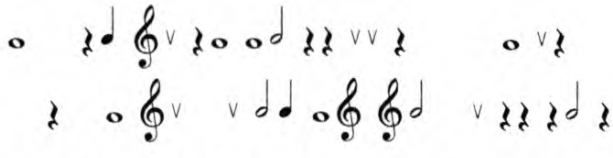
深海のように　静かで暗かった

It was quiet, and dark. Like the depths of the ocean.



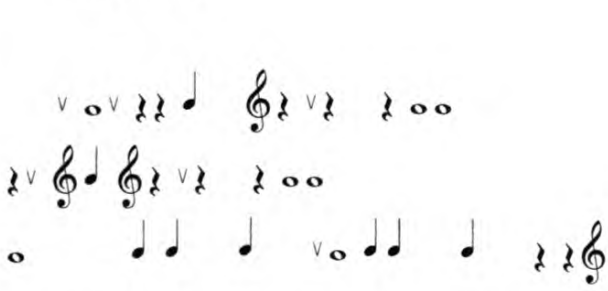
時間も空間も　自分が誰かも分からない

No sense of time, space, or even who I was.



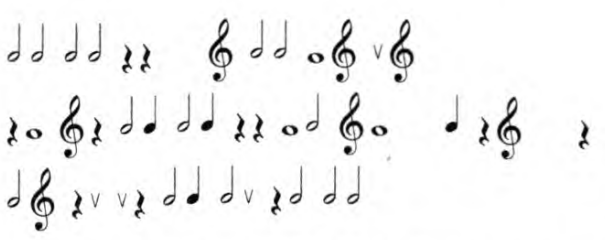
声をあげようにも　何を発すればいいのか分からない

Even if I wanted to raise my voice, I had no idea what sound to make.



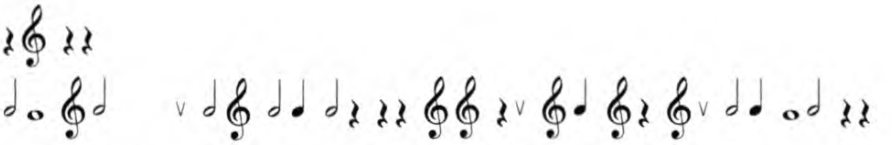
始まりも無く　終わりも無く　このまま闇の中で

With no beginning and no end, here in the darkness...



ただひたすら　在り続けるのかな　と思っていた

I felt like I was just existing.

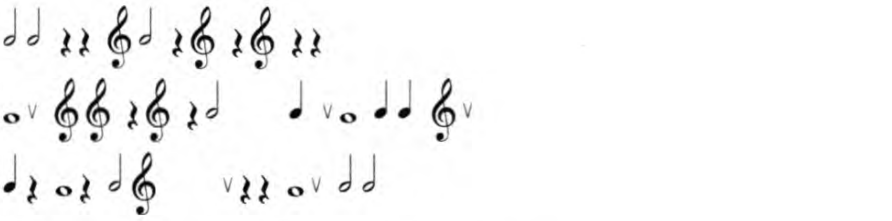


が　それは突然終わりを告げ

But suddenly I was told that would end—

世界が始まった

And my world began.



誰かが　深海の闇を　吹き飛ばした

Someone blew away that deep oceanic darkness.

話しかけられている　理解できない

They spoke to me, but I couldn't understand.

確かなのは自分の在り方が明らかに変わったこと

All I was sure of was that those words had clearly changed me.

「意志」は「人格」になった

My "will" turned into my "personal identity."

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF HATSUNE MIKU

[06/18 MON 16:40]

Inside a room where no wind blew and no sunlight could reach...

All of the windows were shut tight and even had a light-filtering curtain stretched over them. Despite this, the air conditioner had a circulation system that constantly cycled fresh, outside air through the room. On the ceiling, a mix of multi-LED lighting fixtures had been installed, each one a myriad of subtly different colors, all in an attempt to mimic the natural light spectrum as much as possible.

"Bleh. I *still* can't get used to this room," said the girl seated in the terminal to my left. She was organizing data, her light pink, shoulder-length hair swinging gently back and forth. "It's like I can't breathe in here or something. Don't you think so?"

"I felt that way at first," I told her, "but when I thought about how we'd be coming here for the next two years or so, I let it go."

"Hmm...so *basically* what you're saying is it's pointless to worry and that I should just try to get used to it as fast as I can, right?" Aika-san said, looking at me with a slight smile. It seemed to reflect her new, more positive outlook. "You're surprisingly rational."

To be honest, though, it wasn't anything to praise someone for. The research lab's floor plan was spacious and its ceilings were high, with plenty of room between all the desks and laboratory equipment. Even better yet, the number of permanent residents was low. Because of this, the lab didn't feel all that suffocating or oppressive to me—you just had to forget that the air and light were artificially regulated.

"Asano-kun, if you're going to run your mouth, at *least* make sure your hands are running, too," my upperclassman's voice echoed behind me.

"Oh, sorry! I'll be done taking today's data in just a little bit."

"All right, if you say so..."

I turned back around as I spoke. On the surface of my desk, a hand sprouted from a flat, four-inch tall box, as if growing straight out of it. I raised and placed my own right hand on top of the desk, clenching and unclenching; after about a two second delay, the hand projecting from the box began to imitate my movements.

"Okay," Aika-san said. "Next, while bending your wrist, close your fingers in order, starting from your pinky. That test scored a 99.5% match, by the way—simpler motions give us higher percentages, just as we expected."

"*Ha ha!* Too bad our aim isn't just to produce good numbers." I couldn't help chuckling as I spoke; Aika-san had sounded like she'd just earned the high score on some arcade machine.

Continuing as instructed, placing the back of my hand upwards, I turned my wrist clockwise while simultaneously closing my fingers one by one into a fist. Just as before, the hand—an artificial hand, a combination of actuators for each and every muscle and joint in the human hand, covered in a silicon coating—faithfully mimicked my right hand's movements after close to a two second delay. At a glance, one would think they were the exact same motions, but...

"Oh. As *usual,* once we try this level of tests, the tracking

values drop down to 88.2%," Aika-san grumbled next to me, staring at her monitor. On the screen, the recordings from the cameras filming my hand and the hand growing from the box were being played back side by side. The second the two hands' movements deviated from each other to even the slightest degree, a light would mark the point of deviation. Following this, the graph being created in a separate window would update.

"Can I continue now, Aika-san?"

"Yes, please."

As I repeated the previous motions over and over again, the graph shown on Aika-san's monitor gradually grew in length. As soon as the twentieth repetition finished, Aika stopped me and said, "Okay, we're finished with this motion test. Let's move on to the next."

This was how Aika-san and I spent our day, like all the others before it: gathering data in order to make the artificial hand more dexterous. It was monotonous and repetitive work, but for the two of us, who'd just joined the research lab after becoming juniors in the spring, it was about the only work that we were likely to get for a while. And either way, we knew *someone* would have to do this data gathering, so neither of us felt especially discontented. Even though Aika-san sometimes looked *incredibly* bored.

"You can stop there for today, Asano—you, too, Kurose." It was Machimura-san again—our expressionless, rimless glasses-wearing senior upperclassman—calling out to us from behind my back.

"Understood. We'll be heading out, then," Aika-san said, turning around to reply. I let out a small *thank you* and quickly bowed my head. With that, today's practical training was over.

◆ ◆ ◆

[06/18 MON 19:10]

"Ahhh! I was starving that whole time!" Aika-san said, while she plunged her fork vigorously into her spicy cod roe spaghetti.

"The late hours at our school's cafeteria are really a lifesaver," I replied, raising some of my green onion ramen to my mouth.

"I guess since this school is filled with STEM courses, it kinda *has* to be." *Sluuurp.* "From third year on, everyone's always tied up in a research lab way far into the day. Plus, all those graduate students work late, too." *Munch, munch.*

Pasta wasn't the kind of food you were supposed to slurp while eating...but if I'd pointed out Aika-san's bad manners, she probably would've just given a careless shrug and said, "You're just being petty! As long as it's delicious, what's the problem?" so I stayed quiet.

"Anyway," Aika-san said. "Your ramen looks just as bizarre as ever."

"What? How so?"

"The pile of green onions stands a good ten centimeters higher than the edge of your bowl. If that's not weird, then what *is* it? Looks like there're more green onion than noodles!"

"You're supposed to order it with extra toppings, so you get a ton of green onion on top. You pile it high until it's *just* about

to pour over the sides of the bowl. It might *look* like an unusual amount at first, but actually it's the perfect balance. It's an impressive sight—like an onion Mt. Everest—and when you eat it, your mouth feels like an onion fair. In other words, this is Onion Festival Ramen—OnionFest Ramen, for short."

"Is that even any good?"

"Of course it is!" I said. "Green onion is essential in ramen. That's right. It's like how you need a fight stick if you're gonna play a fighting game on your console at home."

"There you go again with the weird analogies...By the way, Asano-kun."

"What?"

"It seems like that fourth year Machimura-san has taken a liking to you."

My hand froze. Aika-san was looking at me, grinning ear to ear.

"What makes you say *that* all of a sudden?"

"Earlier when he said 'that's good for today,' he was speaking directly to you, at first—I was just an afterthought."

"Now that you mention it...he *did* do that, didn't he?"

"I felt a definite difference in his level of priorities."

"...Huh? You did? Just from the order he said our names in?"

"It's not just that. Even from the beginning, *you're* the only one he's openly referred to by first name. It's like he wants to pay more attention to you than me...No, that's not it. Look, I'll put it plainly: Machimura-san has special feelings for you."

"Wha—?! Why'd you have to go there? No way—absolutely *no way!*"

If I didn't stop her, she'd just continue saying whatever she wanted. I tried to interrupt her and drown out her fantasies, but...

"Really? I'm not so sure...*Hee hee!*" Aika-san shot back, ignoring my objections and failing to contain her giggles.

Aika—Kurose Aika—was my only classmate in the research lab. But just as in our current conversation, she often looked at things far differently than me.

Forcing a smile, I shot down Aika-san's hypothesis politely. "Listen, it's weird to assume that Matsumura-san thinks about me that way."

"Really? That's how I see it. I had a hard time with a lot of things when I was younger, so I'm pretty confident in my ability to read people..."

What did she mean, 'when I was younger'? She was only twenty-one! While I was wondering whether or not I should properly call her out on that...

"Yo, Asano!" A loud voice called out my name from the entrance to the cafeteria. When I looked over, I saw a head of short, orange hair shining against the night.

"If you're done, we gotta head to work!" The tall, thin man quickened his pace as he approached me.

"Oh, is it already that late? Give me a second, Jūhachi. I just need a minute to finish eating."

"C'mon, Asano, you're always takin' it easy." The person calling me by my first name—Asano—was the guy I'd spent all my general education classes with my first two years here, Ishii Jūhachi. The characters of his name weren't read Tōya or Jūya,

but as Jūhachi. Similarly, he called me—Shinosato Asano—by my first name. To put it simply, we were good friends, and even worked the same part-time job together. But...

"Jūhachi, for someone who dropped out, you sure aren't embarrassed to come here every day."

"Why you gotta be so judgmental, Aika? Comin' here for a good, cheap lunch, then comin' to meet Asano before work is my daily routine. Usually colleges are open for anyone to come and go—so it's not like it's a problem, right?" Jūhachi laughed. He was always like this. He'd initially dropped out because he was "bored," a reason that would make any parent faint in shock, and began his new life as a part-time worker. Afterwards, I heard that his parents actually *had* fainted at the news.

Aika sighed in reply.

"All right, let's get going," I said, eating the last of my ramen and standing to leave. Before I could finish standing up, Jūhachi took my ramen bowl and delivered it quickly to the cafeteria's dish return window. While it was a nice gesture, it had more to do with his general impatience with everything. By the time I had gotten my bag over my shoulder, he was already at the cafeteria's entrance.

"Get movin', Asano," he called out. "It's gonna be real busy tonight!"

"Ah, that's right. We should get there a little early. See you later, Aika-san!"

"All right, see you tomorrow. Wait a minute—isn't today Monday? Why's it going to be so busy if it's Monday?"

"When it's busy depends on the business, of course! You coming too, Aika?"

"I was just over there. I don't have the money to afford to go *that* often."

"Money, huh? Aika, you're cute enough. Just get one of the guys there to pay for you!"

"*No way!*"

"All right, all right, I get it! If you're not comin' then let's go, Asano!"

Then, as usual, Jūhachi and I sped off to our part-time job.

◆ ◆ ◆

[06/18 MON 20:80]

The club where Jūhachi and I worked was a ten- to fifteen-minute walk from the school's campus.

"Thank you for waiting. Here's the Cassis Orange for you and the ginger ale for *you*," I said, passing drinks to two customers wearing the club's paper bracelets taped around their wrists.

"Two bottles of Zima, please!" another customer called out.

"Coming right up!" All I had to do was pop the caps off Zima bottles, so I delivered them quickly. It would be nice if *everyone* ordered Zimas.

"Screwdriver, please!"

"I'd like a rum and coke!"

"Wait just a moment, please," I said. But the drink orders kept coming steadily, one after another, so that me and Jūhachi could

barely handle them all. To top it off, the music always played so loudly we had to shout so customers could hear when we confirmed their orders, just as they had to shout to give them.

"The first Monday of the month's been just as busy as I expected," said Jūhachi, sighing as he made cocktails beside me. The bar had finally quieted down as customers, now on the dance floor, had gotten their drinks.

"A lot of fashionable people are here today, too," I said. From their artfully cut hair to their sophisticated shoes, the crowd of people losing themselves in the music on the dance floor, all looked supremely stylish.

"Yup, as expected for a bunch of beauticians."

He was right—most beauticians had Mondays and Tuesdays off, so they often went out on Monday nights, especially Mondays right after pay day. So although Aika-san didn't understand, this is why Jūhachi and I knew tonight would be busy.

"Oh yeah!" Jūhachi burst out. "Having this big a crowd is getting me pumped!" He kept firing himself up as he headed toward the back of the bar.

"Knock 'em dead, Jūhachi!" I called after him. He raised his right fist in reply and disappeared into the back.

He reappeared a few moments later in the DJ booth, looking completely focused—a marked difference from his usual demeanor. With his headphones inverted and covering one ear, Jūhachi carefully adjusted the equalizer and fader on his equipment. He then changed the record from the simple track the previous, more-experienced DJ had put on before Jūhachi relieved

him. As the beat of the new track took over, an uplifting piano melody began to play. With it, the mood on the dance floor shifted. I could see Jūhachi's nervousness ease, even from the bar, as he grinned with satisfaction.

Jūhachi and I began working here, at the Gold Transistor—a small club that fit about a hundred people—during fall two years ago. Jūhachi invited me to tag along to his interview, and they hired us on the spot. We started working the next day. I was thrown into it on a busy weekend, but seeing all the different people who came to the club and listening to all the cool new music, I quickly grew to like the job.

Jūhachi liked the work even more than me...or rather, he liked the world of the club. Within a month, he declared he was going to be a club DJ, and was bored with school. He dropped out the next week.

"There are so many things I want now. Turntables, mixers, but most importantly, material—CDs and records. There's no end to it all!" For Jūhachi, going to school had become a waste of time. We all tried to stop him—me, Aika, even our general education advisor—but Jūhachi blew past all our attempts. After he dropped out, he used his new free time during the day for various odd jobs—convenience store clerk, security guard, beef bowl restaurant staff and the like—so he could spend all he could on DJ equipment, records, and CDs. He used that momentum to secure an apprenticeship with the regular DJ at the club. Jūhachi's name, DJ Eighteen—a simple translation of his name into English—was added to both the regular rotation and the special

event timetables. Of course, the time he spent in the booth during events was still very short.

In between drink orders I glanced over to the DJ booth, where Jūhachi swayed to the music as he changed records and slowly slid the fader down.

That was Jūhachi. Everyone said he was reckless and absurd, but he was really just doing what he wanted to do. That's how I saw him, anyway.

◆ ◆ ◆

[06/19 TUES 12:20]

I awoke a little past noon the next day, opened my window, and rubbed my eyes as I looked outside. The rainy season wasn't yet over, but the glaring sunlight reflecting off the river running close to my room indicated that today, at least, would be clear. My apartment, in an old building often inhabited by university students, was a 100 square-foot room with a kitchenette and its own bathroom. At home, I'd slept on a bed, but since getting my own place, I'd used a futon. My only furniture was a slide-out bookshelf, a computer, and a small table, but while I could fit a bed in here if I wanted to, I couldn't get used to having so little floor space.

I put my clothes on sluggishly and exited my room. The campus was about a ten minute walk from my apartment, so getting there in time for my afternoon lectures was a piece of cake. That wasn't to say that I was skipping my morning lectures—just that during course registration, I tried my best not to sign up for those.

Working part-time at a club meant I came home late, and based on how I handled that last year, this year I decided to only take afternoon courses if I could help it.

I saw the campus buildings soon after I began my walk. Tohto Institute of Technology: known for being comparatively easy to get into compared to other polytechnic universities—and for its multitude of unique research laboratories. Mine was the "High-Functioning Artificial Humanoid Research Laboratory." Or more simply, it was the lab where pure and applied research was done to develop robots, prosthetics, and things of that nature. The number of such research labs had increased compared to years past, but despite their growing popularity, they were still a research minority. As for why I decided on *this* research lab, well...I guess I thought it sounded interesting.

I made my way up to the big lecture hall on the third floor. In an annoying turn of events, I still needed to finish my Analytical Chemistry requirement, so this class was one I absolutely couldn't miss. Most of my classmates had already earned their credits for the class, so there wasn't anyone I could rely on to take notes for me. In other words, all I could do was show up to class every day and do the work by myself.

◆ ◆ ◆

[06/19 TUES 13:30]

Analytical Chemistry lectures always dragged on forever...but at least class was finally over for today. I ate something light at the

cafeteria to tide me over, then walked to the research lab.

"You look so tired, Asano," Aika said, greeting me with a smile. "I guess it really *was* busy last night."

"Yeah, it was pretty busy last night, but I'm tired for a different reason." My body was used to working at the club, so barring anything out of the ordinary, it didn't usually affect me the next day. If I looked tired, it was definitely because of Analytical Chemistry.

"Hmm...I don't think I get it...But anyway, let's get started." Aika skillfully operated the mouse and keyboard at the terminal until the monitor looked the same as it did yesterday. Similarly, at my desk, the artificial hand was set up just like yesterday, ready to go.

"You're right," I said. "Let's try to do this as efficiently as possible." But right as I was about to begin the repetitive motions with my right hand—

"Shinosato Asano-kun," a low, slightly husky voice called out from behind me. That wasn't Matsumura-san's voice. I turned to find a professor standing behind me.

The normally blank-faced Matsumura-san gave a rare eyebrow raise. "Morisu-sensei, don't you usually have a lecture around this time?" He had a point; many of the professors normally spent the day giving lectures.

"Oh, I cancelled my lectures," he said in a calm, dispassionate voice as he looked at me. "I have something I wanted to talk to you about as soon as possible. Can I have a few minutes?"

"O-of course." What a professor could possibly have to discuss with me personally, when I had only recently been assigned to the research lab, I couldn't begin to imagine.

"You can stop your work for today here. Please come to my office." Leaving me with that, Morisu-sensei disappeared into his office in the adjoining room.

"To have the professor suddenly call you into his office even though you're new...! I wonder if he sees potential for a talented researcher hidden within you," Aika-san said.

"That can't be it," I said. "What could he tell about me from the basic data gathering I've been doing?"

This immediately set Aika-san and Matsumura-san to discussing me, but I wasn't listening. Questions flooded my mind, though I was too baffled and confused to even *begin* trying to understand and answer them all. First of all, the professor and I had only talked to each other once: when I was assigned to the research lab and he welcomed me. I didn't know about the other labs, but here, that was how it was every year. What was happening now was highly unusual.

I had absolutely no idea why the professor wanted to speak with me, but in any case, sitting there and obsessing over it wasn't helping. I got up and knocked on the professor's office door.

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Professor Morisu was sitting at the large desk at the far end of his office. "Please have a seat," he said.

I assumed he was referring to the matching reception sofas facing each other near the door, with a coffee table between them. However..."Um...Morisu-sensei, who is this?" Another visitor

already sat on one of the sofas.

"Ah, can you sit in front of her, on the other side, for me?" The girl had a slender torso, with long, slender arms and legs. Her long green hair shone like an emerald, and was collected into two ponytails perched high on her head. Her skin was porcelain white under her strange clothing. She sat perfectly still with her eyes closed.

I sat down in front of her nervously. Once the professor confirmed I was seated, he wordlessly began operating the PC terminal on his desk.

I wondered what exactly was going on. I didn't mind being called in here, but without being told why, I only remained confused. And this girl...was she the professor's daughter? No, that couldn't be it. If that were the case, what possible reason was there to have me meet her all of a sudden? I couldn't think of one. Most of all, I was confused about why she was sleeping sitting up. I had no clue what was going on. Unable to bear it any longer, I asked, "Um...Morisu-sensei..."

The moment I spoke, the professor stopped typing and stood up. "Look forward."

"Huh?"

Looking forward, the girl in front of me slowly opened her eyes. "Hel-lo," she said.

".....?!"

While the girl looked around fifteen or sixteen years old, her faltering speech was like a child's. Or perhaps more like a foreigner's? In any case, something felt off.

"Introduce yourself to her, Shinosato-kun," the professor told me, his eyes fixed on the terminal monitor at his desk. I looked at her face, into eyes that held some kind of fragility, and felt like time stopped. In this kind of situation, I thought it would be more normal to be overwhelmed with questions rather than to follow his instructions and introduce myself. But, almost as if I was under some power of suggestion, I opened my mouth and said, "Hello, my name is Shinosato Asano."

"Shinosato-Asano-san-it's nice-to meet-you."

The green-haired girl returned my greeting with the same unsteady rhythm as before, smiling faintly. While I was still extremely confused, the relief of exchanging greetings with the strange girl and her broken speech let me relax a little. Once calmer, I became curious about the true intentions behind the professor's unexplained instructions.

"Morisu-sensei, what exactly is going on here? Who is this girl?" I looked at the professor, but his eyes remained transfixed to the LCD monitor.

"This is the culmination of our research and development: a cutting-edge, artificially-engineered android," the professor said softly, meeting my eyes for the first time since I came into his office.

"Huh?" I was speechless. No matter how you looked at her, she looked *entirely* human. But if that were the case, then what was with that hand I was working on, or the legs and face I'd noted the upperclassmen with? This was on an entirely different level than the androids I had seen until now. It was *too*

different—suspiciously so. Nevertheless, judging from the professor's indifferent expression, I didn't think he was making a joke or trying to fool me. That and...

This girl's inability to speak properly *did* give me a strange feeling earlier, like she was human, but also not quite human. She looked like she was human, but still had a foreign, uncanny atmosphere about her.

"My-name is-Hatsune-Miku. Nice-to-meet-you-Asano-san," the girl—or rather, the android?—said, looking at me as she introduced herself. I had no idea what to say back, or how I should say it—no idea whatsoever what to do next.

"Shinosato-kun, I will leave her field testing to you," the professor said, voice plain and bland as a prepared speech recited precisely on schedule.

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[06/20 WED 11:00]

The fourth floor of my school's main building had four classrooms that could fit hundred-person lectures. My "History of Computing" course met in one of those lecture halls: Room 402. It was one of the only two morning classes I had each week. The associate professor in charge taught each class's history lesson at the same dragging pace. Last week, we finally got to the point in computing history where programming language came about. I wondered how we were going to cover everything up to modern programming terminology if it continued at this pace, but

the class showed no signs of speeding up. Today was the same as always.

Except...the atmosphere in the classroom was different.

"Asano-san-what would you like-me to do?" "Hatsune Miku" asked me. She sat beside me in her strange, pale blue, sleeveless one-piece.

"Oh, uh...Sit here quietly and listen to the person standing up in the front, and if they say anything you think is interesting or could be useful, jot down a note for later, I guess?"

"Understood," she replied quietly, looking directly into my eyes while a slight, satisfied smile appeared on her face. Following this, a quiet murmur broke out in the classroom. We were sitting in the middle of the lecture hall, but whenever she spoke, the people in front of us twisted around to stare. I also could hear people whispering behind us. I definitely wasn't turning around to confirm it, but for the past twelve minutes, I'd felt their gazes boring into my back.

I had pretty much expected this reaction; this girl was far too... cute...to ever be inconspicuous. As for me, I sat next to her wearing a passable pair of jeans and a forgettable shirt, with a pair of sneakers ripped at the heel. I wore a modest pair of glasses, and my face had nothing to make me stand out. Even *I* understood that I was eternally plain. Nothing about me stood out. Sitting next to someone like me undoubtedly made her stand out even more.

"Hatsune Miku." The professor explained to me that "hatsune" was written using characters that meant "first sound," while her given name was written in the phonetic alphabet. She was a girl

who smiled often, with long, waist-length green hair that made her shine.

The "field testing" that Morisu-sensei asked me to do yesterday was basically this: to take this android out of the research lab and monitor how it reacted to everyday, normal environments.

"That will be all for today," the associate professor said. "I'll be attending a conference next week, so there will be no class. We'll go over the developmental history of the Fortran and ALGOL languages the following week, so please read the corresponding chapters before coming to class." He gathered his notes and books together and moved from the lectern towards the hall's entrance. As he left, he turned slightly and stole a glance at "Hatsune Miku" and me. It seemed like he, too, was curious—especially considering how often he'd looked our way during the lecture.

"Is the-lecture-over?" the android asked me, tilting her head slightly.

"Yes. Once the teacher leaves the classroom, the lecture is over. Oh, a 'teacher' is..."

"The person-who stood up front-just now-and talked about-all those things-is a teacher-correct?"

"Yes, exactly," I said and nodded my head. "Hatsune Miku" smiled slightly.

"Asano-san-what-are we doing now?"

"Now is our lunch break, so we'll get lunch at the cafeteria." If this was Jūhachi, I'd tell him something like, 'time to grab some grub,' but I didn't want "Hatsune Miku" to learn such a rough way of speaking, so I made sure to answer her properly.

"C'mon! 'Get lunch'?" said a familiar voice. "If you're gonna try and say it all proper, you gotta go all out and say 'we shall now go and have our lunch,' or something."

"That's still a weird way of saying it! Wait, Jūhachi?!" Speak of the devil...or rather, think about him; when I raised my head, there he was.

Except it wasn't *just* Jūhachi in front of me.

"Shinosato! Who is this girl?!"

"She's so cute! What's her name?"

"How do you know her, Shinosato-kun? Is she your little sister? A relative?"

"Wait, Jūhachi—you can't keep showing up every day for lunch if you've dropped out!

"Huh, but why not?"

"You know, she totally looks like a high schooler. If she's not, she has an unbelievable baby face."

"Jūhachi-kun, let's go out drinking sometime soon!"

"Sure, sometime soon!"

"So, Shinosato—who is she?"

As if we'd been thrown into a storm, a crowd of people suddenly surged around "Hatsune Miku" and I, and flooded us with questions. That, and it seemed that even after dropping out, Jūhachi was still as popular as ever. Whenever he showed up for lunch or dinner, he always attracted a crowd of former classmates wanting to talk to him.

As for "Hatsune Miku," whether it was because she was bewildered by all the noise or because she didn't know how to respond

to being the center of attention, she sat motionless next to me with a vacant look on her face.

"Wait, wait," Jūhachi said, raising his voice. "Asano can't answer if we ask him all at once. Calm down, everyone." When Jūhachi had gained control of the crowd, and everyone had settled down, he added, "But I gotta know, too! Asano, you have to tell me *everything!*"

He'd set the stage for me. Man, I was really bad at this kind of thing...But I had no choice. I had to accept my fate. "Well...um... you see, this girl is..."

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[06/19 TUES 16:50]

"The android's organs are made of artificial cells composed of pseudo-proteins... The entire nervous system, comprising the neural network and brain stem, is made of a single layer of carbon nano-tubes... Inside of the brain—or rather, in all of the ganglions and nerve plexuses—is a configuration of a high-reliability, low power consumption CPU that..."

There was too much technical terminology for me to make heads or tails of the information contained in the schematic of "Hatsune Miku" that the professor gave me. The only thing I understood was just how unbelievable it all was. If it was true that the girl sitting in front of me had been made according to these schematics, then it wouldn't just be a groundbreaking achievement in the scientific community—it would shock the entire world!

However...sitting next to the girl, Morisu-sensei wore the same dispassionate, serious expression as always. And really, what reason could he possibly have had to call a normal student like me in there just to pull my leg?

"This project is the combined effort of many researchers from many laboratories—not just our own," Morisu-sensei said. "The only thing I've really done is take the fruits of each department's labor and brought them together. The ultimate result is this: 'Hatsune Miku.' As you can see, 'Hatsune Miku's' appearance is of an ideal...no, rather, it's quite like an *actual* human's appearance. Through the exhaustion of each department's resources, our labors created a piece of technology far beyond our current capabilities. We've had to keep the development process a secret to avoid anyone patenting her."

"In that case," I said, "now that she's complete, can't you announce the results and patent her yourselves?"

"You're being a little hasty. 'Hatsune Miku,' as of right now, is still incomplete. That's why your assistance is necessary."

How was she still *incomplete?* You didn't even need to touch her to understand how soft her skin was. Her expressions when talking looked completely natural. What type of material and how many drive units had they used to create such texture and subtly?

It all made me wonder how Morisu-sensei could say she was still 'incomplete.'

"What I need your help with is a field test, not development in the laboratory," Morisu-sensei said. "The only things we

currently have digitized and installed on her are basic conversation patterns, the bare minimum of normal body movements, and an ability to respond to conversation flow at an eight-year old's level. Based on that, we want to test how capable her learning functionalities are in terms of creating complexity and diversity within her artificial personality. In short, her personality-creation abilities. If we can clear this hurdle, I believe without a shadow of a doubt that androids can begin to actively become part of our society as a subspecies of mankind. If that happens, society should see that these androids are deserving of the same rights as us. Once we get to that point, the conditions for going public can be prepared."

I understood what he was trying to say, and also understood what he was looking for. But...

"Why did you choose me?" I asked. If I had been their choice, wouldn't anyone have worked? I still didn't get why he'd picked me, specifically.

"Please don't take any offense to this, Shinosato-kun, but I was looking for someone exactly like you—someone with no knowledge in this field. A researcher familiar with artificial intelligence would, without thinking, intentionally try to force the artificial intelligence to learn. But if that were the case, there would be no point to the experiment. And besides, you are someone who can keep a secret. The type of person without any ambition, who acts carefully and with restraint."

"Wait a second. Yeah, it's true that I don't have any artificial intelligence research experience. But, counting today, you've only

ever talked to me twice—how could you know that I 'can keep a secret,' or that I don't have any ambition?"

"Once again, I'd like to apologize," he said. "We asked a psychology specialist to analyze the papers you submitted for your entrance exam, as well as your first and second year mid-year and final papers. From the results of those examinations, it was determined that you were the most suitable person in this research lab to oversee the field test."

I felt a little scared hearing that. At the same time, I also felt a little bit angry. They'd done all that without my knowledge?

"Like I said, I'm sorry for all of this. However, I hope you'll understand the importance of this project, and agree to cooperate with us. All that we are asking is for you spend your normal, everyday life with her. Of course, we will give you a research assistant's stipend. Don't think too hard about it—just think of it as a new, lucrative part-time job."

It still didn't feel right to me...but "Hatsune Miku" sat next to the professor, staring at me with an innocent smile on her face.

"...All right," I said. "I'll help." I still couldn't comprehend everything he'd said, but, even in those first ten-odd minutes since meeting her, "Hatsune Miku" had already drawn me in.

"Excellent," Morisu-sensei said, "Now, let's go over the implementation guidelines for the field test." And he laid out several documents on the coffee table and began to explain them.

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[06/20 WED 12:20]

"Basically, her Japanese is still a little shaky!" I said, laughing nervously. It was a bad lie. I was sweating with anxiety, and felt still more pour down my back.

"So you have a half-Japanese, half-English cousin. You're surprisingly cosmopolitan, huh," someone said.

Hold on a second, I wanted to retort. If my cousin really *was* half Japanese, how did that make *me* the cosmopolitan one? Unfortunately, because I couldn't afford any more unnecessary trouble, I had to let that comment go.

"So back in England, she skipped a grade and went straight into university? Not only is she cute as a doll, she's *also* super smart? How annoying! That's so unfair!"

Since all of this was part of the lie I'd thought up yesterday, I felt kind of bad.

"All right, enough with the interview," Jūhachi said, breaking up the crowd at just the right time. "If we don't get lunch at the cafeteria now, lunch break will be over."

"That's right, let's go."

"Understood-Asano-san," "Hatsune Miku" said, as we stood up and followed Jūhachi out of the lecture hall. On our way to the elevators, we ran into Aika-san and a group of her friends, all on their way back from a lecture.

"Hey, Jūhachi, Asano...and..." Aika-san trailed off. "Why are you walking with a high school girl? Oh, is she on a school tour? Isn't it a weird time of year for that, though? Anyway, why is she here?"

Unfortunately, Aika-san was quite a curious person. I guess even if she wasn't, she'd still be interested in this girl. Frankly, she definitely looked out of place in our group. Aika-san's friends had already formed a wide circle around "Hatsune Miku" and were staring at her.

"Yo, Aika, gonna grab lunch with us?" Jūhachi asked.

"Yeah that's fine. Are you all coming too?"

"Yeah!" her friends said.

Aika-san had asked her friends and replied to Jūhachi without ever letting her gaze wander from "Hatsune Miku." On the way to the cafeteria, I repeated the explanation I'd given to the curious crowd of onlookers in the classroom.

"So, in short," Aika-san said, "Her dad met and married her mom while he was working overseas, then she was born, and now that her dad's overseas post is over, the whole family returned to Japan with him. Is that it?"

"Yeah, yeah. And her father is my mother's brother—in other words, my uncle."

"Hmm, so *that's* why your last name is different."

Obviously, there was no way that my mother's maiden name was something as bizarre as "Hatsune." It was basically all one big lie, but I felt like I'd been able to say it much more smoothly the second time around. It felt like I was quickly growing used to telling lies...Maybe I was more adaptable than I gave myself credit for. Not that I was exactly *happy* about it.

"She was a university student in England, so she took the transfer student entrance exam to get into our school. She's just

auditing classes for now, but once she starts earning some credits, they said she'll even be able to join one of the research labs."

"Hmm, and I guess as her cousin, you were singled out to be her support while she's getting used to it here. I understand now."

Aika-san had good intuition, but it seemed like she didn't harbor suspicions about "Hatsune Miku's" ancestry— for now, at least. For the time being, I felt relieved.

We reached the school cafeteria, which was never crowded. There were quite a number of different restaurants in the area around campus that served good food in large portions, and while those places were a little bit more expensive, they also offered a much greater selection. Because of that, many students left campus to eat lunch. That meant we could easily hold onto our seats while we began eating—Aika-san with her curry rice, Jūhachi with his beef udon, and me with my green onion ramen.

"You *always* order that, Asano," Aika-san said.

"This guy's a green onion ramen junkie," said Jūhachi. "If he doesn't have it at least once a day, his hands and legs start shaking."

"So that's it—he has a dependency. He's probably gonna need therapy." Aika-san spoke with a straight face, making the girls with her laugh.

"Wait, I wouldn't say I have a *dependency*," I said, trying to defend myself while speaking properly. "Though I do like it." Once Aika-san assumed something, she could become incessant about it.

"*Ha ha ha!* You're so strange, Aika! But it's okay, cause it's funny!" Jūhachi said. Everyone, including the girls with Aika-san, nodded in agreement.

"I definitely don't think an oddball like *you* has the right to tell me I'm strange," Aika-san replied, smiling faintly, with no trace of anger about her. Such tactful responses were one of her charming points.

"Wait, Miku-chan—is that all you're going to eat?" Aika-san was in the middle of putting a sweet onion in her mouth when she directed the question at "Hatsune Miku," who was barely opening her mouth to nibble on a sandwich.

"Ah, she's a pretty light eater."

"Even though she's sixteen years old, and she's in a growth period? That's hard to believe."

I tried to brush off her concerns smoothly, but Aika-san was watching me suspiciously. I was in trouble...

According to the lecture I received from Professor Morisu the day before, in order for "Hatsune Miku" to be as close as possible to humans, many of our human organs and intestines were artificially reproduced inside her. Because of this, she was able to eat things—to a certain extent, at least. They obviously hadn't implemented an actual digestive system—or rather, there was no machinery inside of her that could break down food and create from it necessary metabolic material. Her artificial cells were made by copying actual cells from living organisms, but they had much greater longevity than natural cells, so metabolic regeneration wasn't necessary.

Additionally, while humans required glycogen to move their muscles, and ate food in order to get it, "Hatsune Miku's" muscles were composed of artificial fibers and submerged in a special

polymeric liquid. The expansion and contractions of her muscles seemed to be a mechanism that utilized the energy produced by the liquid's chemical reaction. Furthermore, because the polymeric liquid would degrade after extended use, the liquid had to be replaced once a week—or at least, that was what I'd been told.

In short, from the beginning, "Hatsune Miku" never needed to eat food. Despite this...

"Take care of her and treat her the same way you would a normal human," is what the professor ordered me to do. As for food, he'd said, "I want her to eat, as long as it isn't an amount that will exceed the capacity of her artificial stomach."

Basically, "Hatsune Miku's" lack of appetite was due to necessity. It wasn't like I could explain all of this to Aika-san, however, so the only thing I could say was that she was a light eater.

"I think she should eat better," Aika-san said, looking at "Hatsune Miku's" face. "It would be a shame for her body to break down."

Aika-san seemed genuinely worried, but I wanted her to let it go. I tried to change the topic to something else, but my ad-libbed remarks weren't working. To make matters worse, Jūhachi—*then* of all times—was entirely focused on slurping down his udon, and wasn't paying any attention to our conversation. I was running out of options when all of a sudden—

"I-don't really-feel hungry-but-I'm healthy."

Smiling, "Hatsune Miku" had replied to Aika-san's questions herself!

"Well, okay then. As long as it's not some crazy diet, I guess it's fine..." Somehow, it looked like Aika-san believed her; she went back to eating her curry.

".....?" Now it was *my* hands that had frozen in shock. Just now, "Hatsune Miku" had not only understood everything Aika-san and I talked about, but she had responded appropriately to the content of our conversation. She'd never done anything without my guidance before, only ever saying "what should I do now"—but here, she'd used the information she "learned" to "answer" the question herself. She already was showing a considerable amount of adaptability, and the first day of the field test wasn't even over.

I remembered something Professor Morisu had told me, letting a little bit of his confidence show:

"When this type of artificially-made android is put to practical use, it will revolutionize the world."

My interest in "Hatsune Miku" was steadily increasing, and with it, my resolve to see this field test through to the end. Which was all well and good, but...

"By the way, Asano," Aika-san said, "it looks like we're the center of attention here." I didn't need her to tell me. During the walk to the cafeteria, and now inside the cafeteria, "Hatsune Miku" drew everyone's eyes. It would probably be like this for a while. The girl just stood out too much...

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[06/20 WED 13:05]

We all finished our lunches and went our separate ways. Jūhachi headed off campus for his part-time convenience store job. Aika-san went to her first afternoon lecture. As for myself, I didn't have afternoon classes today, so I could go directly to the research lab, but...

"Asano-san-What are we doing next?" Looking up at me slightly, "Hatsune Miku's" eyes seemed filled with anticipation.

"*Hmm*...I've got it! I'm going to take you on a tour of the school. You don't know it very well yet, right, Hatsune...san?"

"Yes-thank you-Asano-san."

She looked directly at me while she thanked me, and without thinking, I became a bit embarrassed. "Oh, i-it's nothing you need to thank...me for. *Ah ha ha!*" Thinking about it calmly, it seemed strange for me to feel embarrassed by the behavior of an android; I decided not to think about it too deeply. The professor asked me to take care of her like a normal human being, so it was fine.

"Asano-san-where are you going to take me?" "Hatsune Miku" prompted, again looking at me with eyes filled to the brim with anticipation.

"*Hmm.* How about, for now, we head down to the first floor?"

"That sounds satisfactory," she replied in a bright, projecting voice. It was a great reply, but if this continued, we would have problems.

"Oh, right—you don't need to use such formal language. It's kind of embarrassing, and..." I drew my face close to "Hatsune Miku's" ear and lowered my voice so that no one else would hear

and said, "Since you and I are supposed to be cousins, if you keep speaking so formally, it might make people suspicious, okay?" I needed to change our background story to one where, despite her living abroad for a long time, I was well acquainted with my cousin. Not many people speak so formally to their younger cousins, after all.

"By 'formally,' do you mean my level of politeness when I speak?"

"Yes, that's right. It's fine to speak that way around strangers, obviously, but around me, it's best not to."

"I understа...Got it, Asano-san." She'd caught herself mid-sentence and reworded her reply.

Although she was an android, it was oddly human how she corrected herself mid-sentence, and I couldn't stop myself from laughing at it. "*Ha ha ha!* Good, that's what I meant." We walked side by side to the elevators. Dealing with everyone's constant staring was tough, but paying attention to it wouldn't help anything.

We got off at the first floor and headed to the athletic fields. There wasn't much there—only a soccer field and a baseball diamond with a small outfield. Our school's athletic clubs weren't popular, though that wasn't to say the *only* outdoor clubs were baseball and soccer. The tennis club borrowed the municipal courts to practice, and our rugby club took a thirty-minute train ride off campus to get to their field.

As I explained the various activities our school had that met off-campus, "Hatsune Miku" nodded her head in understanding, while repeating my words, saying "Baseball, soccer, tennis...I got it."

I paused for a moment, then asked, "What do you mean by 'I got it'?"

"Baseball is a sport that is played with bats, balls and gloves by teams of nine players. Similarly, soccer also uses a ball and is a sport played by teams of eleven players who are unable to touch the ball with their hands. Goalkeepers and players throwing the ball in from the sideline are exceptions to this rule. Tennis is a one-on-one or two-on-two sport played with a ball and racket. I've never seen them, but I know about them."

Now that I thought about it, when I talked to her about 'lectures,' 'lunch,' and 'cafeteria,' she hadn't asked any questions about those words, either. Instead, she had asked me how she was supposed to behave. It seemed she'd already been provided with a vocabulary of commonly used words. My best guess was that they'd made such knowledge part of her initial configuration in order for her to have the bare minimum of conversational ability.

"In that case, let's come back to watch the baseball or soccer club practice sometime. I think it would be better to see them play firsthand, instead of just knowing about the game."

"Thanks, Asano-san. Bring me with you to watch them practice next time."

She had such an active and efficient artificial intelligence that, in order to collect as much information as possible, she must've been programmed to have an almost human level of curiosity. "Hatsune Miku's" frankness in telling me her desires didn't bother me at all; it made me quite happy.

Afterward our tour of the athletic fields, we toured the school with a scrutiny I'd never undertaken before. We took the elevator up to each floor and visited all the classrooms, research labs, and group meeting areas—as well as the student affairs office, and even the men's and women's bathrooms. For our final stop, we visited the roof.

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[06/20 WED 13:40]

Our school had made its roof into a garden. You could always come at this time of day and see students who didn't have class, or university staff with nothing to do, sitting on the benches getting a moment's rest by reading books, playing games, fumbling with their phones, or just staring off into space.

"What is this place, Asano-san?"

"Ah, this is the rooftop. It's a garden."

"But 'rooftop' and 'garden' are two different things." "Hatsune Miku's" eyes darted around restlessly. She looked bewildered.

"Well...it's a garden that was built on a roof. Our school doesn't have a lot of land, so there isn't enough space to create a courtyard area like most schools have."

"So, you're saying it's both a rooftop *and* a garden. Got it."

It seemed unusual things required some explanation for her to understand them—which made sense, I supposed. Look up garden in the dictionary, for example, and it wouldn't tell you they're sometimes built on rooftops.

I guided "Hatsune Miku" over to sit on a bench. I was thirsty after roaming around the school, so I said, "Wait here a second, okay? I'm going to buy us something to drink," and walked to the vending machine next to the elevator, and bought a can of coffee and some juice.

Back at her side, I took a sip of coffee, and said, "If I'm this tired and thirsty just from walking around a bit, I guess I'm not getting enough exercise."

"What does 'being tired' and 'being thirsty' feel like, Asano-san?" she asked, quite directly. This time, I had no idea how to answer her. An android like "Hatsune Miku" would have no idea what being tired felt like. And because she had no need to drink liquids, she wouldn't understand what it was like to be thirsty, either. When she told Aika-san in the cafeteria that she wasn't hungry, half of what she'd said had been going along with my explanations, while the other half had been the honest truth. Explaining the physical sensations of "fatigue" and "thirst" more thoroughly than what was written in the dictionary was going to be difficult.

"*Hmm*...I'd say 'being tired' is when your whole body feels heavy."

"So, it's when your body weight increases for a short period of time?"

"*Ha ha ha!* No, not like that. You're kind of close, but that's not quite what it feels like. You feel sluggish and heavy, to the point where you might think you suddenly gained weight."

"Hm. I think I kind of understand." She nodded her head

vigorously, but I doubted I had adequately explained it to her. I wondered if it was possible that, despite her artificial intelligence, she was taking my feelings into consideration. I'd feel a little guilty, if that was the case.

"So, what does 'being thirsty' feel like?" she asked.

"It's when the inside of your mouth is dried out...Well, before it gets that way, your throat feels dry. Thirst is when you really want to drink some water, or tea, or coffee, or juice. Then, when you finally *do* drink something, it feels really good."

"Um...I think I get it."

"I can't explain it too well, sorry," I said, feeling kind of down.

"That's not true. I get it. What you're saying is that, right now, your coffee is very good, right?" Even when this girl didn't understand, she picked up on the essence of what had been said. Her AI was truly amazing.

"It's just as you said, Hatsune-san: right now, this coffee is delicious."

"When something is delicious, is that a good thing?"

"It's definitely a good thing. When you eat and drink delicious things, it makes you less tired. If you'd like, Hatsune-san, you can try some of this juice." I held out the orange juice I had bought from the vending machine.

"Yeah, I'll try some."

Wait...what? "Did you just refer to yourself using 'boku'?" I asked, incredulous.

"Isn't 'watashi' a formal way to refer to oneself? So shouldn't I use 'boku' instead?"

"No, no, you're a girl—you can just use 'watashi.'"

"But Aika-san is a woman, and she was using 'boku.'"

"Aika-san is a bit...special. She's an exception," I explained, laughing dryly. I wondered if she could understand that Aika-san was a bit unusual.

"*Hmm.* In that case, I will use 'watashi.' Oh, but..." Saying this, "Hatsune Miku" withdrew the hand reaching for the juice and abruptly leaned forward, bringing her face close to mine.

"Huh? W-wait—"

"I don't think you should refer to me as 'Hatsune-san,'" she whispered. "You and I are supposed to be cousins, so if you refer to me so formally, it might sound suspicious, right?" Then, as if nothing had happened, "Hatsune Miku" withdrew and took the can of orange juice.

Of course: she only brought her face so close to mine to make sure I heard her whispering. And *she* obviously whispered because she knew that the truth behind our made-up backstory had to be kept secret. She had only moved because it was necessary.

But, to be honest, my heart was racing—just a little, enough that I could feel my ears turning red. Looking at "Hatsune Miku" in profile, as she sat drinking juice next to me—I could see just how much she was enjoying herself. And barely a minute ago, her face had been mere inches in front of mine.

"Are you feeling tired again, Asano-san?"

"Huh?"

"Well, you were drinking your coffee, but now you aren't moving your hands. Does that mean that your body is feeling heavy?"

"O-oh, no that's not it..." I laughed nervously and took a sip to avoid her question. I was in trouble. This was going to be a problem if I wasn't careful.

"*Hmm*...I guess it's just—you're right: I can't keep saying 'Hatsune-san.' How about just 'Hatsune'? Though that's even stranger..."

"I think it's best if you just call me 'Miku.'" It was an extremely rational conclusion, just as one would expect from an artificial intelligence. But...

"Th-that's...that's right M-Mi..." I was unusually nervous. I had never in my life referred to a girl by her first name without any type of honorific. I mean, sure, I had a little sister back home who I called by her first name—no honorifics—but she didn't count.

"Mi...Miku?" This was certainly a first for me.

"Yup! That's me!" replied "Hatsune Miku"—or rather, Miku—with a big smile spread across her face. Her face... From the first moment we met, she'd worn a never-ending smile, but it was the regular, forced smile a receptionist might make. She had worn it during this morning's lecture and while we were eating lunch. Once we'd started strolling around the school, though, it seemed to change into a softer, gentler smile. And her smile now—it was almost like a child's before going to an amusement park. She seemed to be enjoying herself from the bottom of her heart.

Heart?

No. It was more likely a reaction derived from a complexly built algorithm.

The moment I saw that smile, however, that line of reasoning completely left my mind.

Because I was happy.

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[06/20 WED 14:20]

Miku and I rested on the rooftop for a while, going over each other's schedules for the next day while enjoying the weather and pleasant breeze. To be honest, though, we really just went over my schedule. Professor Morisu's plan was to have Miku's match mine so we could spend as much time together as possible. There were no morning classes tomorrow, so I would meet Miku just before noon. From there, we'd eat together and go to my two afternoon lectures. After those, we'd return to the research lab in the evening.

Incidentally, I wasn't allowed to bring Miku into the research lab. Ostensibly, this was because Miku's status at school was that of an auditing student—but the real reason was that Morisu-sensei instructed me not to. According to him, if people above a certain level of understanding were exposed to Hatsune Miku for an extended period of time, there was a chance that they would figure out she was an android. At her current stage, she had to remain a secret between himself and a handful of researchers.

"Okay," Miku said. "So I should meet you tomorrow at eleven-thirty at the bridge where we met today?"

There were many small bridges that spanned the river by my apartment, but right then, Miku was referring to the one we'd used as our meeting spot earlier that morning.

"Yeah, let's do that. Make sure you don't oversleep."

"'Oversleeping' is when you can't wake up and end up being late, right?"

"Yup, that's it." Although I'd responded calmly to Miku, deep down I was a little surprised. Miku—who'd still had difficulty speaking during this morning's lectures—had become capable of smooth conversations in just about half a day. And not only could she answer my questions, she was also starting to occasionally include some of her own judgments and conclusions. Of course, her conversational abilities weren't at the same level as Jūhachi and Aika-san's, but surely that was just a matter of time.

"Okay, I'm all set for tomorrow, then. What are we doing after this?" Miku asked, wide eyes sparkling with anticipation as she looked at me.

"For the rest of today, I'll be at the research lab, and then I'll be at work. When I say 'work,' I mean my part-time job. So we'll go our separate ways for today and meet up again tomorrow."

"Oh...I understand. I get it, but I still have so many things I want to see..." Miku spoke dejectedly, a small pout on her face. Which reminded me: yesterday, Professor Morisu had said that androids that were advanced to the point of being almost equal to humans would become an invaluable tool for mankind, able to reduce our stress and hardship. That, too, was one of the purposes of this research.

At that moment, however, I think I actually felt *more* stressed. I was totally bewildered. When she made that face at me, I had no idea what to say.

"For now, let's go downstairs. I'll walk you to the main entrance."

We both got on the elevator, but I wouldn't say it was a smart idea. The silence was heavy...but I supposed I just wasn't used to these kinds of situations.

When the elevator arrived at the first floor, we walked the short distance to the main entrance together. A black taxi was there, as if waiting for someone. Then the driver opened the back door, and Miku climbed in.

"See you tomorrow, Asano-san!" Miku called out with a wide smile right before the door closed. I waved goodbye to her, and the taxi drove out of sight.

Tomorrow, I wanted to try as much as possible to answer to that smile, so filled to the brim with excitement and anticipation. I'd only met her yesterday, but her smile had already made me want that.

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[06/20 WED 17:00]

"Your rhythm is off today, Asano."

As usual, I was in the research lab, working with Aika-san to get data samples from the artificial hand. But no matter how hard we tried, we just weren't making any progress today.

"Sorry, I guess I'm just feeling a little off today..."

"That's not good, Asano-kun," Muramachi-san said. "If this continues, your quotas due at the end of month will keep piling up. I'm sure you think I'm just nagging you, but I'm saying this because I'm worried about you, okay?"

Aika-san snickered at Muramachi-san's reprimand, taking it as an opportunity to tell me, "I was right! Looks like Muramachi-san *does* have a thing for you."

I was worried about something completely different, however: the look on Miku's face from earlier. Was a combination of AI algorithms and a man-made human body really capable of producing *that* expression? It was almost human, or perhaps something even more...

"Muramachi-san, Asano and I aren't feeling well today, so we're heading home early."

"*Whaaat?!* W-wait, just a second, Kurose—"

Aika-san didn't wait for Muramachi-san to finish, she just grabbed my upper arm and dragged me right out of the lab. I could hear Muramachi-san at our backs, yelling for us to return, but Aika-san held me fast, and pulled us into one of the elevators.

"If something's on your mind, you should be focusing on that," Aika-san said, her smile perfectly composed, as we reached the first floor.

"...What do you mean?"

"People can die at any moment, so I think it's important to deal with what's bothering you as soon as possible." She spoke aloud, but seemed to be talking to herself as she walked briskly

towards the entryway. After a moment, however, she turned back to me. "It seemed like you couldn't focus, but you just couldn't help it, right, Asano? It is what it is." And she patted my shoulders as if she understood something and saw through my innocent front.

"Um...what couldn't I help?" I said.

"It's been so long since you've seen your cousin that you're blind-sided by how cute she's grown up to be—am I right?"

"Huh?"

"You don't have to play dumb," said Aika-san. "When we ate lunch today, I could *see* how anxious and nervous you kept getting."

"That was..." I was mainly nervous at lunch because I had to keep telling lies.

"I'm warning you, though! Miku is only sixteen! So if you do anything careless, you'll be arrested and your whole life will be over!"

"C-careless?"

"I can't believe you're making me spell it out," Aika-san said. "First, I suggest you add her to your family registry. Then, since she's sixteen, if you get permission from her parents, you two can get married. Cousins can marry each other, you know. If you do everything in the proper order and go through the correct channels, no one can condemn your love. *Pure* love."

"....." Oh no. She was fabricating another story about my life.

"Then, when you have a child, they'll be a quarter Japanese. Miku is super cute and, well, in your own plain way, you have

good features, so I'm sure you'd have a handsome son together... I'm so excited for you!"

"Uhhh, Aika-san? You're jumping to some pretty big conclusions..."

"Oh, *whoops!* I did get a bit carried away...even for a joke. I'm sure the *real* reason you couldn't focus in the lab is because you have a lot on your mind, now that you'll be looking after your cousin."

"Yeah, to be honest, I *do* think that's it." To be even *more* honest, I'd been taken in by— of all things—an android's smiling face.

"You'll probably get used to it pretty quickly," Aika-san said. "But for now, I think you should go to work early and let the club improve your mood. Anyway, I'm gonna head home from here. See you tomorrow, Asano."

And, leaving me with those words to refresh my spirits, Aika-san went home.

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[06/20 WED 19:00]

"Huh? Asano, what're you doin' here so early?" Jūhachi said by way of greeting. "Doesn't your shift not start 'til eight?"

"I left the research lab early," I told him as I cleaned around the bar. "I tried to kill some time, but I didn't really have anything else to do."

"Wow, I'm surprised. I've never heard of you being the type to skip classes, or show up late—or leave early."

"Well, I actually didn't leave early of my own free will—it was because of Aika-san. I guess she was worried about me?"

"What does *that* mean?"

I briefly recounted what had happened to Jūhachi, and he laughed.

"That's so like her! She's a good person, even if she *does* get carried away easily. Once she decides she knows what's best, though, she's like a pitcher who only throws fast balls—won't even try a curveball to switch things up."

His metaphor wasn't the most eloquent, but his evaluation of Aika-san was spot on. I had to agree with him: she really was like that. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized something...

"You know I only just realized it," I said, "but...aren't your and Aika's personalities really similar?" After all—once Jūhachi decided on something, he'd ignore consequences and everyone around him in order to run headlong towards his goal. If that hadn't been true, I was sure he would have still been in school, not training to become a DJ.

"You're totally right! *Now* do you understand my frustration?"

"Huh?" Why would having similar personalities with Aika-san be frustrating?

"Aika is a natural beauty," Jūhachi explained. "Even without makeup, she's one of the top five at school. She's easy to talk to, has a good sense of humor...and those boobs! They're huge! *Huge!* She has these nice meaty legs, too, which are *totally* my type. Her waist isn't overly skinny either—she's a healthy, curvy woman!"

"What are you getting so worked up about...?" I asked.

"Normally, I'd pursue Aika super hard, but..." Gripping the nozzle on the drink dispenser, Jūhachi continued as if truly regretful, from the bottom of his heart.

"Me and Aika's personalities are way too similar. I figured that out barely a week after I met her." A week after meeting her meant that he figured this out barely a week after we all started school. I was impressed Jūhachi had picked up on it so quickly.

"But, you know," I said, "since you two are so similar, doesn't that mean you'll understand each other really well? Wouldn't that make you the perfect couple?"

"Sure," he replied. "And there are definitely times when that's true. But Aika and I would be impossible together. We're both the type to drive straight forward, never put on the brakes—so if we started dating, don't you think it'd be like a giant game of chicken?"

"You're surprisingly level-headed about this." It seemed contradictory, but even Jūhachi, who drove straight through life without hitting the brakes, seemed to have the ability to ease up on the accelerator.

"That's why Aika and I are fated to never be together," Jūhachi said. "So, you should go for it, Asano."

"Huh?"

"Tell her," he went on. "Tell her how you feel—she's a great girl. I think you'd be the best match for her."

What the heck was Jūhachi thinking? "Um, just so you know, Jūhachi, I've never really thought of Aika-san in that way."

"Why not? You don't call anyone else by their first name, do you? Doesn't that mean you like her more than any other girl?"

"That's because...When we were freshmen, she told me that she didn't like how standoffish it felt when friends called her by her last name. So she wanted me to use her first name. That's all." Truthfully, I still felt a little embarrassed addressing her by her first name. But after we became friends, she looked so sad when I called her 'Kuroseki-san' that I'd switched to her first name, and just did my best to deal with the embarrassment.

"This is your chance! Doesn't her saying that *prove* she feels closer to you than to any other guy?"

"Like I said, I've never thought of her that way," I said. "Besides which, I doubt she'd be fine with some *ordinary* guy confessing their feelings to her. She's beautiful—and smart."

"Everybody is way too innocent, I swear," Jūhachi said. "Well, she never looks vulnerable, so I understand what you're saying. It's natural to think that even though becoming her friend is easy, making her your girlfriend would be next to impossible."

"Mmm..." It sounded like he was talking nonsense, but really, his analysis seemed spot on. Jūhachi could be oddly convincing sometimes. Or maybe I was just getting swept up in his energy and momentum.

"Either way, it's too bad, ya know? A girl like that being single."

I had to agree, but..."You dropping out of school was a waste, too, you know."

"Really? It's not a waste! I'm going to become a DJ, so even if I *was* still in school, it wouldn't do me any good."

"I know that it's pointless to say anything, so I normally keep quiet, but it really *is* too bad. Aika-san had said."

"*Hmmm*," he mused. "I just dunno...but in any case, it seems like you're worried about me—you and Aika are good people, after all! *Ha ha ha!*" Jūhachi looked so happy as he laughed, but we really did think it was waste, from the bottoms of our hearts.

"Excuse me, two gin and tonics please!"

"...Oops, coming right up!" As I hurried to pour the drink orders, I noticed the dance floor slowly starting to fill up.

"Looks like it's picking up," Jūhachi said. "It's the middle of the week, though—no way it's gonna be busy. You showing Miku-chan around again tomorrow? She seemed to be the center of attention today, and you looked exhausted by it, too—so why don't you two come relax here tomorrow? Think about it!"

It wasn't that busy at the club today, and the night continued on at a good pace. So much had happened in the past two days that my mind honestly hadn't processed it all yet, but moving around helped distract me. I would worry about tomorrow, tomorrow.

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[06/21 THU 11:30]

The water level of the river near my apartment was usually so low, when the weather was nice, about half of the riverbed was exposed. In the middle of one of the small bridges that spanned the river stood a young girl holding onto the handrail, peering at the water.

"Oh, Asano-san!" Miku jogged over when she noticed me. "Hello!" The expression she'd worn for just a second when we parted ways yesterday had been replaced with a bright smile.

"Hello. Should we go grab some lunch?"

"Yeah! What are we going to have today?" Even though we were just going to eat lunch, she looked at me with eyes full of anticipation. In a way, it put a little pressure on me. But not a bad sort of pressure—in fact, it felt almost comfortable.

"Let's not go to the cafeteria today—let's eat near the train station, instead. That area has a bunch of different restaurants."

"Which station, Shimo-Ochiai or Takadanobaba?"

It seemed she'd also been given some geographical data, among the other information she'd been initially provided with. She was right: both Seibu line stations—Shimo-Ochiai and Takadanobaba—would take about the same amount of time to get to.

"Let's head to Takadanobaba," I said. "There are a lot more restaurants in that area."

We walked together towards the station, side by side. As we moved from the quiet, residential area, to the shopping district connected to the station, the number of people around us steeply increased. Since there were a lot of colleges in the area, a high percentage of the crowd was students—not that I was one to talk.

Nevertheless, even walking around the city, Miku stood out. Many people stole glances as they passed her in the street. Walking around by myself, I never encountered this amount of

staring. Of course, no one was deliberately *stopping* to stare at her, nor had a crowd formed like in the lecture hall yesterday. In that way, at least, it was easier than being on campus.

"There should be a pasta restaurant around here somewhere," I said. "Ah, here we go." Normally, I only ate ramen, curry, or beef bowls when I came to this area to eat, so it'd been a little tricky recalling the Italian restaurant's location. But if you were bringing a girl with you, you had to eat Italian. That was about all that came to mind, though...which was probably a rather depressing thought, if you stopped to think about it. I was a college student, but had never taken a girl out to eat...

Miku seemed totally oblivious to my thoughts as she stood next to me, eyes sparkling.

"I can't wait to try it. Let's go, Asano!" she said, and tugged me into the restaurant by the hem of my shirt.

In the blink of an eye, over the few hours we'd spent together the day before, Miku seemed to have learned how to interact naturally. Her assertiveness had grown, too. As if to support my speculation, when we reached out seats, Miku was the first to open the menu. I couldn't help but think she was trying to experience everything in front of her because she *wanted* to.

"What are you going to eat, Asano-san?" Miku raised her head and asked, after taking some time to read through the menu.

"*Hmm*... I'm going to get the carbonara. What about you?"

"I'll have the carbonara, too." For some reason, her immediate decision to order the same thing as me made me happy.

And so, when the time came, we ordered two carbonaras, one

half-sized. But thinking back on everything, the only thing she had eaten since being born had been a sandwich. No matter how assertive she had become, I'm sure it was too difficult for her to choose from all the different types of pasta and pizza available on her own. *That* was why she'd ordered the same thing as me. That was my logical conclusion.

But for some reason, it still made me happy,

"What kind of job is the part-time job you had last night? I want to know," Miku said, bringing a steaming piece of carbonara to her mouth.

"What kind of job? I'll try to give you a rough idea, but it's hard to explain. The place I work is always playing music, and people go there to enjoy that music. My job is to serve alcohol to the people who come to enjoy the music."

"Alcohol is a type of drink that only those over the age of twenty can drink, right?"

"Yeah."

"Music is sound that comprises dynamics, timbre, texture, and pitch, that—"

"Hold on a sec."

"Yes?"

It sounded like Miku was pulling the definition of "music" from the dictionary installed in her memory. But that's not what music was at all. I wasn't as dedicated to it as Jūhachi, but I still had something to say about it.

"Music is something that you can't really explain with words," I told Miku.

Her expression looked distressed. "In that case, how can I understand what 'music' is?"

I looked up at the restaurant ceiling and did my best to answer her. "This restaurant is always playing music. The sound coming from those speakers is music." When I said this, Miku closed her eyes to concentrate on the song playing in the restaurant. "Also," I continued, "when we walked here, we passed a lot of shops, right?"

"Yeah." Miku nodded, opening her eyes.

"While we were walking, the sounds we heard playing from those stores were also 'music.'"

"I see. That was 'music.' And...what I can hear right now is also 'music'..."

"That's right. 'Music' isn't something that you *understand* or *don't understand.* It's something that you listen to and *feel.* That's why it's best for you to listen to a lot of it." Miku closed her eyes again and listened to the restaurant's background music. I took a moment to listen, too, while looking at Miku.

"All right," I said, "should we start heading back?"

Miku opened her eyes the instant I spoke and smiled.

We left the restaurant and headed to school. On the way there, we heard the music from various stores spill into the street. While walking, Miku listened to each separately, lightly nodding her head, her face joyful. Then we reentered the residential area, and all became quiet.

"The music—it's gone?" Miku looked disappointed.

"Don't worry. You may not be able to hear it around here, but

the music isn't gone for good. You'll hear it plenty of times, at a bunch of different places."

"Really? That's good!" Seemingly relieved, Miku's smile returned.

Seeing her smile, I, too, felt relieved.

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[06/21 THU 16:45]

My afternoon lectures were over—I'd only had the two. Just like yesterday, Miku was the focus of everyone's attention, and after class, a host of people I knew crowded around her. The one big change from yesterday was that I didn't need to explain everything to the crowd myself; Miku fielded half of their questions.

"What's your name?"

"Hatsune Miku."

"How do you know Shinosato?"

"He is my cousin."

"Wow, you're so pretty! And so thin!"

"I am a light eater." Miku answered people's questions fairly normally.

However, the few people who'd been in class with us yesterday said things like, "You're incredible, Miku-chan. Your Japanese has improved so much since yesterday, it's like you're a different person."

In return, I said, "Ah...Well, she's smart enough to skip grades, so I think she had more of a handle on Japanese than I thought.

She probably didn't talk much yesterday because she was nervous." A lame—but necessary—excuse.

"Yes, yesterday was my first day, so I *was* a little nervous." She'd backed up my story without missing a beat. To be honest, she actually helped me out a lot, and was mastering the art of conversation quite quickly. Thanks to that, compared to yesterday, there was no anxiety during lectures, and we got through both of them without a hitch.

"Well, I'm heading to the lab now, so I'll see you tomorrow," I told Miku, as we faced one another, standing before the same first floor entrance as yesterday.

"See you tomorrow!" Miku waved and smiled—without sulking or pouting. It made me wonder: why had she done so yesterday?

"Is something wrong?" I asked, but it seemed Miku thought my blank stare of bewilderment was odd. She wasn't the only one perplexed, though; I was curious about Miku's transformation compared to yesterday.

"Uh, I'm not sure how to put this in words, but..." I began. "But yesterday, when we went our separate ways, you looked really disappointed."

"Disappointed...?" She was silent for a moment—to consider the meaning of the word, I guessed—and then declared, "That's right," with a tone of indifference. "I was disappointed yesterday. But today, I'm fine!"

"Uh, hmm—*why,* though?"

"Because I didn't know yesterday if I would get to see you

again today. But I did! So now I think I'll get to see you again tomorrow, too!"

"....."

So *that* was it. Yesterday was the first day of Miku's life, so she didn't yet have any sense of daily life—that it would continue on into tomorrow and the day after that. But now she understood that tomorrow would repeat in a similar structure to today, which meant she could say goodbye with peace of mind. In other words, in just one day, Miku had advanced from being like a child whose playtime was over when evening came, to an adult who could imagine what the days of tomorrow would be like.

"Of course! We can see each other tomorrow, too. Let's meet at that bridge again."

"Okay! Make sure not to oversleep!" She had already memorized how to correctly use the word 'oversleep.' She then walked away, smiling and waving goodbye. The same car was waiting for her at the main entrance. After getting in the car, Miku looked at me through the window and waved goodbye again. I waved back.

I stood there for a few minutes after the car drove out of sight, staring off into space. This artificial intelligence was *way* too advanced...It adapted so quickly, and its behavior seemed to harbor real emotions. What kind of engineering could actually create something like this?

There was a chance this experiment could be quite dangerous for me.

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[06/22 FRI 11:30]

Miku and I met up on the same bridge as the day before.

"Asano-san! Good morning!" Just like then, Miku arrived first and greeted me with a smile. It was hard to explain, but I felt extremely relieved.

"Looks like you didn't oversleep."

I laughed and said, "I'm not the kind of guy who oversleeps." I didn't know if it was boasting, but I *was* pretty good at getting up on time. No matter how late I stayed up at night, I was always able to get up in the morning. The same couldn't be said of Jūhachi, however, though we had the same job at the same club. Even if we left work at the same time, he almost always slept past noon.

"What are we having for lunch today?"

"*Hmm*...good question." This was bad. I hadn't thought of anything. But even though I was still taking a girl out, two days of pasta in a row was a bad idea. Doing that would diminish the significance of the field test and anyway, taking a girl to the same place two days in a row would only leave a bad impression. In that case, maybe ramen...but it was still too early in the day. And though I didn't really understand it myself, I felt like it was also too early to have *her* eat ramen. It was too early for beef bowls, too. As for curry...I had a feeling that though Indian curry would be fine, a normal curry rice restaurant wouldn't be good, either.

I was in trouble, but I had to decide on *something*.

Sensing my hesitation, Miku gave me a hand. "I think it would be best for you to pick something that *you* like, Asano-san."

"...All right then, ramen."

"Ramen? Sounds great!" Since Miku told me to pick something I liked, I ended up choosing the option I'd initially denied: ramen. I worried about whether it was a good choice, but Miku seemed even *more* excited than yesterday. Her reaction made me very happy.

I walked with a spring in my step, possibly because I'd get to eat green onion ramen today. Next to me, Miku also seemed to walk with a bit more energy. Then, suddenly, a droplet of water fell on my cheek.

"Huh? Rain?" The sun was shining, yet we were being showered with drizzle; it was like being spritzed with a water bottle. It was a fox's wedding—in other words, a sun shower.

"Miku, it'll be bad if you get wet—come here!" I called out to her, running under the eaves of a used bookstore.

"It's okay, it feels good." Miku spun briskly under the shining raindrops, almost like she was dancing. For a second, a small rainbow appeared across her upper body.

It looked like a scene from a movie. She was entrancing.

"This is rain? It twinkles so much—it's very beautiful. It feels good!" Spreading out both her arms and puffing out her chest, she looked up at the sky. Unfortunately, sun showers are fleeting, and when the rain suddenly stopped, Miku gave me a disappointed look.

"Will it rain again?" she asked. "Can *you* make it rain, Asano-san?" She asked the latter question with the innocence of a child pestering their parents for a toy.

"*Ha ha ha!* The weather is the one thing humans have no control over. Let's go grab lunch."

Although I'd replied pragmatically, I secretly hoped for some kind of magic or other. I desperately wanted to grant her wish.

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[06/22 FRI 16:45]

The field test felt familiar by the third day. I had gotten used it, Miku had gotten used to it, and—thankfully—the people I knew in my classes had each gotten to meet Miku and were finally getting used to her presence. This meant we weren't mobbed every break period. As we walked into the hallway after class, Aika-san emerged from the lecture hall next door.

"Miku-chan!" she said. "How's it going?"

"Good!"

"You're just as skinny as ever, huh. Are you eating well?"

Aika sounded like Miku's aunt, the way she worried over her.

"Asano-san and I had lunch before coming to school today."

"I see...So you guys had lunch off-campus, not in the cafeteria." A wide, suggestive, *evil* grin grew on Aika-san's face, and she said, "By the way, Miku-chan—Asano hasn't done anything...*weird* to you, has he?"

"O-of course not!" I said.

"I don't know...Miku-chan's so cute, I'd think *any* healthy young man would succumb to temptation...which would obviously be illegal. So it's my job to protect her from that kind of evil

influence, you know?"

"No, no, no, nothing like that has happened," I sputtered, "Nothing at all, okay?" Aika-san spouted off such crazy ideas sometimes!

"Um...what do you mean by 'anything weird'?" Miku asked.

"Oh, it was a joke, don't worry about it," Aika-san answered smoothly. "What did you eat for lunch? Was it good?"

"I had green onion ramen," Miku said with a grin.

"Green onion ramen? Hey...is Asano forcing you to like the same foods he does?"

"No, not at all! It tasted very good!"

"Well, that's fine, I guess. In any case, it sounds like you're eating a lot! I'll see you in the research lab, Asano."

Aika-san headed off. Since I still had to say goodbye to Miku, we went down to the first floor together.

"Hey, when we were talking to Aika-san back there..." I said to Miku when we'd reached the entrance.

"Yeah?"

"Did the green onion ramen *really* taste good?"

"It did!"

"But I thought you couldn't actually taste food?"

"I don't really know, but..." Miku trailed off for a moment before continuing with a giant smile, "But you said it was good, so it *must* be good!"

After that, we said our goodbyes and I headed to the lab.

"You sure are grinning a lot today," Aika-san said abruptly while we were gathering data. "Did something good happen?"

"Huh? Nah...not really."

"I'm guessing Miku-chan said something really cute to you, and now you're ecstatic?"

"Uh..."

She saw through me in an instant. "Bingo! You're *way* too easy to figure out, Asano-kun," Aika-san said, laughing triumphantly.

I felt self-conscious; being had was frustrating.

I thought back to be Miku had said: *You said it was good, so it* must *be good!*

If there's someone out there who wouldn't be happy to hear that, I'd like to meet them.

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[06/23 SAT 13:30]

My college didn't hold lectures on Saturdays. That said, people still worked in the research labs, so even on Saturday, Aika-san, senior Machimura-san, and myself were usually in the lab in the afternoon. It varied between research labs, but people in the final stages of preparing a conference presentation would stay in the lab overnight on Friday, since the labs were open on weekends. If they were really getting down to the wire, they sometimes stayed overnight *every* night.

I ate lunch with Miku just before noon on Saturday, too, before coming to the lab. Since there were no lectures that day, though, I couldn't bring her to school. After lunch, we went back to our meeting place at the bridge and said goodbye for the day.

The same black taxi waited close by to pick her up.

"Okay, look right," Aika-san ordered from behind the lab camera in front of me.

"...like this?" I asked.

"Yeah. Good. Next is up. Don't move your head. Just look up as far as you can, using only your eyeballs." She continued to capture my eyeball movements with the camera.

"This is a lot more tiring than the 'hand' was..." I said. We'd finished most of the data collecting for the "hand" yesterday, so now we were working on the "eye."

Without certain measures, the artificial "skin" tests—that is, the artificial tactile organ tests—couldn't be done properly. When taking the "eye" data, the lab's light-filtering curtains had to be kept drawn so ambient light couldn't alter our results. The windows stayed closed because the lab's temperature, humidity, and air flow were closely maintained to remain consistent. Moreover, the laboratory entrance was sealed by two types of doors.

We were performing tests in a lab filled with all those kinds of aforementioned equipment. I'd heard from the upperclassmen and research associates that the lab consistently announced research results last year and was very highly rated. Despite this, however, the girl that I'd met in the professor's office, separated from this room by a single door—or, rather, the android girl I'd met that looked completely human—was in a completely different league from the research done there in the lab.

"Okay, next is the lower right," Aika-san said.

"So...around here?"

Just because Miku was leagues ahead of this research didn't mean I could neglect my own work here. If I did, I'd cause trouble for the other members of this laboratory—so I would do what was needed of me.

"Shinosato-kun, could I talk to you for a minute?" I turned in my chair and looked behind me to see Professor Morisu standing there.

"I have something I'd like to discuss with you."

"Please wait a moment, Morisu-sensei!" Machimura-san said suddenly, butting into the conversation. "Not just once, but *twice* now—just what sort of things do you have to discuss with such a new member of the research team? If it is a job vital to our research here, I humbly suggest that I would be more suitable for said role, sir!" For some reason, Machimura-san spoke like he was in the army.

"Why are you talking like you're in the army, Machimura-san?" Aika-san piped up at once, words echoing my thoughts.

Either the retort didn't reach Machimura-san or he'd chosen to ignore Aika-san while he continued to stare at the professor.

"I think you've gotten the wrong idea, Machimura-san," Professor Morisu said.

"What?"

"My daughter has really gotten very into what she refers to as 'club music' recently. I heard that Shinosato-kun works in a club part-time, so I've been asking him what songs he recommends. Isn't that right?"

"Oh, yes." All I could do was agree with what the professor said.

"It goes without saying, but I'm just a normal father when I get home, you know. I want to have something in common with my daughter, for us to talk about."

"O-oh... Is that what it was about..."

"So—now that that's settled, I'll be borrowing Shinosato-kun for a little while."

I stood from my chair and heard behind me, "*Hmph!* I need him here so I can guide him!" and then, "*Heh heh heh,* so it was like that after all."

While I could hear both Muramachi-san's resentful voice, and Aika-san's unrestrained responding laughter, I decided it was best to pretend I couldn't hear *either.*

It had been a few days, but I was once again on the sofa in the professor's office. Today, however, Miku wasn't there.

"Sorry about that," said Professor Morisu. "Thanks for going along with my story."

"Not at all...more importantly, what did you need to talk to me about?" I couldn't help feeling intimidated just seeing him. When I thought about how he was the man who had built Miku, I felt even *more* intimidated. The professor was speaking dispassionately, while I cowered in awe.

"For the time being, you've done a good job. I appreciate your cooperation."

"Okay..." It felt strange for him to thank me, even though all we had done was get lunch and go to class together.

"From here on out," Professor Morisu said, "I want to add to the conditions. Basically, I'd like to widen the scope of the field

test—I want you to bring her along to more places, not just on campus or during lunch. For example, the club where you work."

"What?!" That was impossible—there was an age restriction at the club, after all.

"Is there a problem?" he asked.

"Yes. No one under twenty-one is allowed inside the club. Considering her appearance, she would be stopped at the door."

"I see. In that case, anywhere is fine. The zoo, an amusement park, the park, a museum. Since tomorrow is Sunday, it'll be easy for you to go out, right? We'll give you holiday pay for the day, of course."

"Well, that's..." This was happening too fast.

"Oh, and while you're here: I think I mentioned this the other day, but I'll tell you again, just in case. Miku has full-body maintenance every Monday and won't be able to go outside, so the field test will be paused on those days. From here on out, I'm expecting your cooperation from Tuesday to Sunday, just the same as this past week."

"...U-understood." I felt again like I was being pressured into something. Despite his words, it really felt like the professor was *begging* me; it was hard to refuse. Professor Morisu probably knew from his research that I had this type of personality, and had chosen me because of it. However...

To be perfectly honest, I *wanted* to take Miku to a lot of different places and show her a lot of different things.

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[06/24 SUN 13:15]

"Asano, I'm gonna start putting in songs for us to sing!" Aika-san shouted. Jūhachi stood next to her, shouting his lungs out.

"*Aha ha ha*—I'm fine." I enjoyed listening to music, but I was a terrible singer.

"What the heck are you saying, Asano?! Weren't *you* the one who invited us to karaoke in the first place?! Whoops, interlude's over. ♪ 'Woah-oh-oh-aaah-oahhh! I won't leave a single of them behind! All of those cynical bastards! I'll drown them in the sea! In the concrete!' ♪" Jūhachi was someone who liked listening to music *and* singing along with it—even awful, frightening lyrics like those.

"Miku-chan, is this your first time at karaoke?" shouted Aika-san.

"Yes!"

The situation had come about an hour earlier, which was when the events of the day had started...

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[06/24 SUN 12:10]

It was Sunday. I headed to the bridge at noon and—as usual—found Miku waiting there, staring at the surface of the water, as usual. But I was in a bit of a pinch. The professor told me that anywhere was fine, I just needed to have her tag along...but I had never gone out to have fun alone with a girl before. I had no plan. Still, I couldn't stay on the bridge and wait for something to come

to me, so we began walking, heading towards Takadanobaba Station without any real destination in mind. I was hoping I'd think of somewhere to go while we walked.

When we reached the shopping district, Miku started bobbing her head, following the rhythms of all the various songs leaking onto the street from the stores.

"You really like music, huh?" I said to the charming figure beside me.

"Yeah, I do!" she responded immediately with a smile.

Professor Morisu was right—she'd definitely enjoy the club where I worked.

It was strange, though. Upon further consideration, Miku hadn't shown any interest in music until the day before yesterday, which made me wonder: wasn't the timing of Professor Morisu's request the day before—when he'd asked me to take Miku along to work—just a little bit *too* perfect? All he'd said was that he wanted her to be treated like a human and have many different experiences. But logically, they had to be keeping some sort of log, independent of the field test—and the researchers were doubtless checking that log thoroughly. *That* was why I'd been ordered to bring her with me to the club—it had to be.

If that was true, was everything I said in our interactions being listened to? It really seemed like it. The professor told me yesterday that I was doing a good job, which must have meant that he knew exactly how I was conducting the field test. I didn't feel good about it, but all I could do was think about it as another aspect of this "part-time field test job."

"Where are we going today, Asano-san?" Miku asked, peering into my pondering face with a smile full of anticipation. "There isn't any school today, right?"

"Yeah, we're not going to the campus...but I just got an idea." Snapping back to the situation in front of me, I took out my cell phone and called Jūhachi.

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[06/24 SUN 13:25]

Miku and I sat in a dimly lit, private karaoke room across from Jūhachi and Aika-san. Aika-san was singing a popular idol song from six or seven years ago while perched in her seat. She leaned forward a little to see the monitor.

"Get a good look, Asano!" Jūhachi crowed. "Aika's in a skirt today, a *miniskirt*, no less! How rare is *that?!*" Even when he wasn't singing, Jūhachi was loud.

"All the machines at my laundromat were out-of-order—every single one!" Aika-san shouted during an interlude in the song, jumping from her seat. "I was just out of pants, okay? I wear skirts sometimes too, you know!"

"*Ohhh,* look at those legs! Such a beautiful shape!" Imitating a cameraman, Jūhachi made a rectangle with his thumb and forefinger, following Aika-san's legs from every angle. It was rare to see Jūhachi fired-up about anything that wasn't music. But he was right—Aika-san *did* have great legs...but I stopped that train of thought from going any further.

"I don't mind if you look at them, but don't come any closer! I can feel your breath—it's way gross! And it goes without saying, but touching my legs is *obviously* off limits!"

When the interlude ended, Aika-san remained as she was while she sang.

"Oh really?" Jūhachi exclaimed. "I can look all I want? In *that* case, I'm gonna get as low-angle a shot as I can."

It would be nice if I didn't have to say this, but Jūhachi tried to slip under the table—though he returned to his seat quickly, when Aika-san gave him a hard kick to the top of his head.

"Asano-san, what are Jūhachi-san and Aika-san doing?" Miku asked.

"Oh that's...I'm actually wondering the same. I don't really get it either...*ha ha...ha!*" There was no way I could explain this to her. Their conversation was too weird, for one thing—saying things like "I don't mind if you look at them," and "I'm gonna get as low-angle a shot as I can."

As the lyrics to the song ended and the outro started, Aika-san put down the microphone and turned towards Miku. "You don't know any Japanese songs, right, Miku-chan? This place has a lot of British songs, too, though. I'd love to hear you sing them, if they have any you know."

"Oh, that's right!" Jūhachi chimed in. "I like some British stuff, like The Stone Roses!"

"That's way too old, Jūhachi."

"Well what about 808 State? They're relatively new!"

"Why would a band with *no vocals* have songs at karaoke?"

Worse than that, I thought, *why would his mind go there before bands like Queen and Jamiroquai?*

"I'm sorry, but I didn't really listen to much music while I was in England," Miku said, looking apologetic.

"She skipped a lot of grades and went straight to college, so she probably didn't have much free time to listen to music," I covered quickly.

"If that's the case, Miku-chan," Aika-san said, "let's learn a whole lot of Japanese songs for you to sing at karaoke! When I was your age, I was too embarrassed to sing in front of everyone, but it feels really great once you try it!"

"All right! Next time I'll bring a ton of my recommended tracks for you, so you can learn to sing them!" said Jūhachi, who had done a good job of moving on from his earlier antics...

Before coming to karaoke, I'd made sure that Miku's and my stories had matched. We'd already known there wouldn't be any songs that she knew how to sing. I mean, she'd only become aware of *music* the day before yesterday, after all. To get around this, while we waited for Jūhachi to arrive after I called him, I adlibbed a scenario for Miku to get our facts straight.

"Miku," I'd said, "this is a secret just between you and me, okay? You can't tell Aika-san or Jūhachi."

"A secret...Okay, I get it!"

It was a good answer, but I still worried whether she could manage it. On the other hand, she'd managed everything from word nuances to facial expressions perfectly thus far. And while I had a bad feeling that she'd been steadily learning how to lie

since day one, in this situation, there was nothing we could do about that...

"Okay!" Jūhachi said. "If Asano ain't gonna sing anything, then I gotta sing something to get everyone hyped!" And he did just that, jumping to his feet and quickly entering a song with the remote control. An intense intro started to play. Miku started kicking her heels to the music, getting into the rhythm. When Aika-san sang, Miku had listened carefully with her eyes closed, slowly swaying to the music.

"Are you having fun, Miku?" I asked her.

"Yes!" Miku looked at me as she replied, legs still moving in time to the music. It seemed that my idea to bring her to karaoke (since I couldn't take her with me to the club) had been a good one.

"Music isn't just listening; it's singing, too!" Miku said.

"Yup," I agreed. "There's singing, playing musical instruments—a whole lot of different parts." Our voices didn't reach Aika-san, thanks to Jūhachi's shouting, so we were able to converse privately. Aika-san was watching us and smiling. I'm sure she saw us as a close pair of cousins.

Jūhachi ended his enthusiastic performance and Aika-san began another song, this time a recently popular girls' J-pop piece. To be honest, Aika-san's singing wasn't particularly good—but her voice was powerful. She didn't shout, like Jūhachi; instead, her voice overflowed with vitality... Well, that might have been overstating things a bit, but at any rate, hers was a voice that made you feel energized when you heard it.

"♪ It's no good to worry, about each and every thing,

If you don't keep your eyes on me, then I'll leave you... ♪"

As the song moved into the second chorus, I looked toward Miku, who again looked engrossed in the music, her eyes closed, body rocking back and forth.

No. It was *more* than that.

".....♪.....♪"

She was humming. Humming next to me, in a barely audible voice, and matching the tone and rhythm of the music perfectly.

Miku was humming with a look of pure bliss on her face.

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[06/25 MON 18:40]

I went to school alone, ate lunch alone, and went to lectures alone. After finishing my practical training in the lab, I headed to the school cafeteria with Aika-san to grab food before going to the club for work. Jūhachi joined us; he was on campus once again just to get food.

"Now that I think about it," Aika-san started, "Miku-chan hasn't been around today."

"Yeah, she doesn't have any classes on Mondays," I lied—sort of.

"Really? I thought for sure that Miku-chan registered for all the same classes as you."

"My uncle asked me to look after her, so she *did* sign up for most of my classes, but on Mondays, she has things she needs to

do at home. I don't really know a lot about it myself, but I'll ask him next time I see him."

In my head, I kept replacing "Professor Morisu" with "my uncle"—but my story wasn't necessarily an outright lie. The "things at home" Miku needed to take care of was her "full-body maintenance." Her daily charging, AI logic checks, and health checks on her artificial organs could be done in a short period of time, but large-scale maintenance—such as emptying her artificial stomach and replacing all the polymeric liquid that created the energy necessary to move her artificial muscles—required a whole day to perform...or at least, that was what I'd been told. Despite how human Miku acted, she was still just an android, after all.

I wasn't allowed to be there for her maintenance. Same went for her daily charging and checkups. I didn't even know where the black taxi that always picked her up took her every day. Doubtless it was because it wasn't something I needed to know.

Come to think of it, last night when we returned to the bridge and Miku got into the car, she'd looked a bit lonely.

"I know we can't see each other tomorrow, but we'll be able to meet on Tuesday, right?" she had asked with a hopeful expression. I'd probably had the same look my face.

"But you know, Asano," Jūhachi said, "I don't mean any offense, but that girl skipped straight into college. And not *only* that, but she managed to pass this school's transfer student exam in one go, right? So...isn't she smarter than you?" he asked bluntly. "And with that in mind, won't she be fine without you looking after her?"

I couldn't argue his point. As far as my grades were concerned, although I had a good amount of credits, I was only averaging Bs and Cs. "...That's a good point, I suppose," I admitted. "It's just because she isn't used to living in Japan."

"You were pretty absentminded in the research lab today too, Asano-kun," Aika-san pointed out. "I bet you were thinking about Miku-chan again."

"Really? You get like that just from going one day without seeing her? You're pretty innocent, huh."

"This is dangerous," Aika-san admonished. "She's only sixteen years old, you know. *Sixteen*."

"Um, can you two stop acting like you know what's on my mind?" Their relationship was such that if they saw an opening, without saying a word to each other, they immediately started teasing me. It was usually pretty funny, but sometimes it got annoying.

"*Heh heh!* It was a joke, just a joke."

"I don't know...I don't think we can completely rule it out."

"No way, no way," I said. "She's my cousin, and she's only sixteen."

But though I obviously denied everything, when I thought it over again, I found myself unsure. I didn't think I had any romantic feelings for Miku, but I *did* feel drawn to her.

Not only that—I also felt like I couldn't just leave her alone.

Nor could I deny being curious about how she seemed to change almost every day. Yesterday in the private karaoke room, Miku had sang for the first time. She'd only hummed a little, but

that was definitely still singing. Miku was quickly absorbing all our behaviors by watching and imitating them. Seeing how far she would grow from here would be extremely interesting. I was distinctly aware of all this about myself.

However...Why was it that Miku's looks of happiness and regret caused changes in my own emotions—even though I knew she was an android, and all her reactions were the result of AI algorithms?

It was thoughts like these that left me unsettled.

Before my mind could wander too far, Jūhachi interrupted my train of thought. "Okay, then. Shall we head to work now, Asano?"

I shook myself. There wasn't any point in overthinking things right then. I just needed to continue with the first test. Even if I thought things over again later, it still wouldn't be too late.

As we left the cafeteria, Aika-san called out her own unique brand of encouragement: "Knock 'em dead at work, you two!"

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[06/26 TUES 10:25]

I was asleep in my room when the sound of a chime woke me. Who the heck was ringing my doorbell this early in the morning? I didn't remember ordering anything online—was it a newspaper salesman? If so, I could just ignore them and they'd leave...either way I was tired. Very tired. I had gotten off late from work last night.

I had just fallen back to sleep when the doorbell rang again. This was terrible. If whoever was at the door kept ringing the bell until I came out, then there was no way I could go back to sleep. I had no choice, but to rub my eyes I headed towards the entrance. I unlocked and opened the door and—

"Good morning, Asano!" Miku was standing there.

"...Hn? Huh? Wha?" I was half asleep and wasn't quite sure what, exactly, was going on.

"If you don't get ready soon, we're gonna be late for class," she said.

"Wait, seriously?!" I turned to look at the clock on my wall, and it showed the time was almost ten-thirty already.

"I was waiting at our usual spot, but you never came. I thought maybe you had 'overslept,' so I came to wake you up!"

Good job, me...

Apparently, I'd been so tired after getting home last night that I'd forgotten to set my alarm. For someone supposed to be good at getting up in the morning, this was disgraceful. "I'm sorry!" I said. "Wait a second while I get changed."

"Don't worry about it. If you start getting ready now, we can make it to the second period lecture on time."

I hurriedly closed the door and brushed my teeth, washed my face, and got out of my pajamas and into my normal clothes.

"Thanks...for...waiting..." Going from being woken up to dashing around my room with almost no time in between had left me out of breath and panting.

"Let's get going, then!" Encouraged by Miku's smile, I led us

down the apartment stairs, and we headed to campus.

After calming down, I tried seeing if Miku would answer my current question: "Hey, Miku, who told you where I lived, or which room number I lived in?" I hadn't expected her to find my room like that, so suddenly.

"I knew from the beginning. You just haven't overslept until now so I never had to go." From the beginning...in other words, from the moment I was put in charge of her field test, she'd been loaded with my information, at least to some extent. Well, in any event...

"Thanks for coming to wake me up. You really helped me out." She really *had* saved me a lot of trouble; today's lecture had a strict attendance policy.

But to be honest, it didn't feel good finding out that my address was being given out without my knowledge—but if Miku was the one to know, I felt a little better about it.

Then, Miku said something crazy.

"Hey, Asano..." she trailed off, looking up at me slightly as she walked at my side.

"Yeah?"

"I want a key to your room."

"*What?!*"

"When you oversleep, I want to be able to wake you up properly rather than ringing the chime."

"Oh...*Ha ha,* that's what you meant. I'm happy to hear that, but today I just forgot to set an alarm. I don't think I'll oversleep again."

"Okay. You said you never oversleep, but since you did today, I

thought that you might again sometime in the future, and it just might be better if I had a key." Miku looked a bit disappointed. Why was she disappointed?

The second week of the field test had begun, and Miku was already messing with my equilibrium, right from the start of week—right from the start of the morning! Hearing her tell me that she wanted a key to my apartment had gotten the best of me. I'd never had a girl ask me that before...

As usual, after class had ended, I left Miku and headed to the research lab, where once again, Aika-san teased me to her heart's content, saying, "Your head's in the clouds today, too? Did something good happen again?"

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[06/27 WED 19:15]

I went to class with Miku again today, saw her off safely, and then went to the research lab.

After gathering my data for the day, it was time to head home. Since I didn't have work and I'd been eating out so often recently, I thought I'd cook at the apartment for a change. I had plenty of rice, so if I bought some meat and vegetables and made a lot of curry, I'd be set for dinner for a few days. These were my thoughts as I walked home through the streets that night. But as I neared my apartment...

"Good evening, Asano-san!" Standing on the same bridge as always was Miku.

"Miku? Didn't you go home already?"

"Yeah, but then I came back!"

"Why are you here so late...?" This was the first time Miku had come to see me at night. I wondered if it was allowed. But thinking about it, I doubted she'd be able to go out on her own—which meant Professor Morisu had to be aware that Miku was out and about at this hour.

As I was speculating, Miku stared straight into my eyes and said, "I didn't feel like we got to spend enough time together today, you know?"

Her enthusiasm and drive had increased last week, but I didn't realize they'd already advanced so far. With my surprise, another emotion began to well up inside of me.

"All right. In that case, you wanna head over to the station or something?" If she was asking this of me, I wanted to respond. I felt that certainty inside.

We walked together through the same shopping district we always crossed to get to the station. I'd intended to stop by the supermarkets near the station to buy meat and vegetables anyway, so I figured I'd show Miku what a supermarket was like. Part of me looked forward to how she'd react.

".....♪.....♪" I heard Miku humming—but then she stopped, grabbing onto the hem of my shirt.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"I hear a fun noise." Miku pointed towards an arcade. "What's that, Asano?" She looked at me once more, still pointing, with eyes like a child's: brimming with curiosity and wonder.

"Oh, that's a rhythm game."

"Rhythm game?"

"Yeah, music plays from the machine. You press the buttons in sync with it to earn points. There are lots of different types of games, so it's hard to explain it all in just a few words, but with *that* game, the higher your score is, the better you are at the game."

"A music game...I wanna try!" Miku said, eyes sparkling.

I had already figured that she would want to play it once she knew what the game was about, since she liked music so much.

"Ready?" I said. "Circles will fall from the top of the screen in time with the music, like this...so when a circle overlaps with one from that line on the bottom, you press the button that's the same color." I explained this to Miku while I played the game. Even while I demonstrated, Miku was moving to the rhythm and humming along with the melody playing from the machine.

"Got it? Think you can do it?"

"Yeah! Let me try!"

After I finished my song, I gave Miku my spot.

"♪♫.....♪♫♪ .....♪" Miku's hands flicked rhythmically from button to button.

"I can't believe this is your first time! You're very good, Miku."

"♪♫.....♪....." Humming along to the melody, Miku was fully immersed in the game. I couldn't tell whether my words just weren't reaching her, or whether she was so focused on the game that she couldn't respond. Either way, her lack of response didn't bother me—it really looked like Miku was enjoying herself from the bottom of her heart.

After we'd had our fun playing the rhythm game, we left the arcade.

"Have you not had dinner yet, Asano-san? Are we going to stop somewhere?" Miku asked while we were walking through the shopping district on our way to the supermarket.

"Instead of eating out tonight, I'm gonna make dinner at home. I need to pick up the ingredients at the supermarket —"

"So now we're going shopping, right?!" Miku blurted, impatiently sharing her conclusion before I could finish my sentence. This was her first time going shopping, and her first time going to the supermarket, so I had no doubt that she did so because she just couldn't contain her excitement.

"Wow...Are all of these 'vegetables'? There are so many!" Miku's eyes sparkled as she surveyed everything around her in the supermarket.

"That's right. Can you grab an onion and potato from over there and put them in the basket for me?"

"This...and this one, right?"

"Perfect. Next is carrots..."

"Carrots, carrots. It's this orange one, right?" Miku picked up a carrot and studied it for a moment before putting it in the shopping basket. She then took an immediate interest in the vegetables stocked next to the carrots.

"Oh, do you need some of these, too?" she asked. Following her gaze, I saw a plethora of green onions lined up on the shelf.

"They're labeled 'onion.' Don't you love onions? We should buy some!"

"*Ha ha!* I'm making curry tonight, though. You don't usually put green onions in curry...although I'm sure some people do."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Also, it's not so much that I love green onions or anything—just that I love *ramen* with green onions."

"Hm...this is hard."

"It *is* hard. I don't fully understand it myself. I can't quite explain the appeal of green onions in ramen. At first, they have this pleasant, crunchy texture. Then as time passes and the onions absorb the soup, they get softer and start tasting a little sweeter... They have the same elongated shape as the noodles, but their texture is almost the complete opposite. For ramen, you *need* green onions...But I can't explain it very well." I'd gotten pretty passionate without realizing it.

"Um...for now, I get that it's just hard to understand!" Miku said, going along with my explanation for the time being.

"All that's left is pork. I have the curry roux back at the apartment, so once we get the pork, we should be set."

"Got it!"

After paying for everything at the register, we moved the meat and vegetables from the basket into bags.

"Shopping is fun, isn't it, Asano-san? There are lots of different things for sale at the supermarket."

"That's true. But shopping requires money, so you can't just buy whatever you want; you have to pick out exactly what you need and just buy that. I suppose buying whatever you want could be interesting too, though."

"I see, I see. Asano, you know so much and can do so many things—it's amazing!"

I didn't really think shopping at the supermarket was anything amazing...but although the field test was progressing, for Miku, many of these things still wore the glossy sheen of novelty.

"After this, are you going back to your apartment to make curry?"

"Yeah, I am."

"I want to make it with you! And eat some with you, too!"

I wondered if that was okay—it was already past eight o'clock at night. If there was an issue, however, I'd probably get a text or phone call from Professor Morisu telling me to send her home, so I supposed it was fine.

Miku looked at me with the same eyes she always had—filled with anticipation. I wanted to entertain Miku, not overthink things.

"Sounds good," I said. "Let's head back."

More and more, I found myself wanting to show her things, to give her a host of different experiences. These feelings only grew stronger when we were together—and right then, I felt them more than ever.

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[06/27 WED 20:20]

My room was a studio apartment in a building intended for student housing, built around fifteen years ago. While I wouldn't have called it a dump, the place honestly wasn't that nice. It was

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safe to say that well off people wouldn't live there—so it should *not* have made a good target for burglars and thieves.

And yet.

Inside that modest apartment building—in front of the door to *my apartment*—crouched a small, sweater-clad figure, ear pressed to the door, completely focused on moving the piece of wire they'd jammed into the keyhole.

"Um..." I paused. "What the heck are you doing?"

"Oh, Onii," the small figure responded, staying crouched as they turned to look at me. It was Yoruko, my little sister who lived back home in Saitama with my parents. "I wanted to practice my advanced techniques by picking the lock to sneak into your room," she said as she stood, with a hint of embarrassment.

"I understand that it's fun to try that stuff, but you know, if someone saw you and reported it, the police would be over here in a flash. You'd make Mom and Dad cry."

"You're probably right, but I wanted to surprise you," Yoruko replied, sticking out her tongue. Then she withdrew a key from her pocket, unlocked my door, and turned on the lights as she strode into my room.

"Wait a sec! If you already had a key, why didn't you just use that in the first place?!"

"It's not as fun and anyway, I wanted you to compliment me for picking the lock. Like, 'Yoruko, you sure are good with your hands!'...or something like that."

All I could do was force a laugh. Yoruko was pretty attached to me; she'd sought ways to entertain me ever since she was little.

Her desire to impress could be excessive, however, and now and again her method of entertainment tended towards today's brand of crazy. And now, she was staring intently at Miku, who was standing next to me.

This...was bad.

"Asano-san, who is this?" Miku, too, seemed to have questions about the unexpected person in front of her.

"Oh, well, she's my—"

Before I could finish, Yoruko cut me off. "I'm Shinosato Yoruko—Shinosato Asano's little sister. Thank you for looking after my brother."

She'd made a polite bow and said 'Thank you for looking after my brother.' That *definitely* meant that she thought Miku and I were in a romantic relationship.

Meanwhile, Miku was confirming the definition of the word 'little sister.' "By 'little sister,' she means that she is a female younger than Asano-san, who was born to the same parents, correct?"

"...Huh?" Yoruko looked bewildered.

"If you wanted to give a perfect definition, that'd be how it would sound, right...?" I said, laughing nervously. My palms and back were sweating.

"I see..." Yoruko said. "She's the type to choose her words carefully."

"Y-yeah, that's it. You got it."

The look of confusion left Yoruko's face. Even though she was my little sister, I wanted to praise her for accepting this false explanation so easily.

"Asano-san's little sister, Yoruko-chan, it's nice to meet you. My name is Hatsune Miku!"

"It's nice to meet you too, Miku-san." Yoruko reached out cordially and shook hands with Miku.

"So, Yoruko, why are you here?" I asked.

"Finals are coming up, so I came to have you help me study! And to stay overnight. So—how about it?"

"What do you mean 'how about it'...don't you have *school* tomorrow? You'll be in trouble if you don't leave while the trains are still running."

"Tomorrow's the School Founding Day. You went to the same middle school as me—how do you not remember that?"

"Oh...now that you mention it, that *is* tomorrow isn't it?"

"It'd be nice if you'd remembered. Ever since you left for Tokyo, it feels like you've neglected your hometown—*and* me. I guess the city really *does* change people."

"No way! That's not true." She was messing with me pretty harshly just because I'd happened to forget my old middle school's School Founding Day. When I lived at home, Yoruko enjoyed teasing me incessantly. I felt like she'd calmed down since I started college and living on my own, but every now and then, she'd tease me like this. "So there's no school tomorrow..." I said. "In that case, I guess it's actually more dangerous to make you go home this late."

She met my response with jubilation. "Yay! Thanks, Onii!" She'd been like this ever since she was a kid. Whenever I'd agree to one of her requests, even if it was something small, she always

reacted as if happy from the bottom of her heart.

Now that I thought about it, Miku's reactions resembled Yoruko's a little bit.

"For now, though, I need to make dinner."

"Okay! I'll help, Onii!"

"Me too!" Miku said.

My kitchen area was quite small and not really meant for cooking. As I rarely cooked, that wasn't necessarily a bad thing, but with three people standing together in the kitchen, you couldn't help but feel how small it was.

Admittedly, having *anyone* stand in the kitchen with me was a first in and of itself.

"Asano-san, I finished peeling the onions!"

"Thanks, leave them there for now."

"I'll cut them up," Yoruko said. She looked delighted as she chopped them skillfully. Yoruko had been helping my mom almost every day since she was little, so as a middle schooler, she had already mastered most basic household chores.

"Can you cut the carrots, too, Yoruko-chan?" Miku asked.

"Sure, leave it to me. If Onii does it, he won't cut them evenly and the pieces won't heat uniformly."

"You're so harsh, Yoruko..." I said.

"It'd be nice if you said, 'You're so dependable, Yoruko.' *Heh heh.*"

"Oof...I guess that *is* more accurate."

And so the work in my cramped kitchen bustled onwards, and all the ingredients made it into the pot.

"We aren't adding the roux yet, Asano-san?" Miku asked.

"We need to let the vegetables and meat simmer first. We'll add the roux when they're tender—so for now, we'll take a break." Plugging in my computer, I opened up the media player and put on some music on shuffle. Miku and I sat facing each other on either side of my small, floor table.

"...♪...♪" Looking happy, Miku synced up with the song that was playing and began to sing. The first song ended and the next one began. As the intro to the next song finished...

Miku began singing.

"♪...Why do you have such a long face?
I don't want to see you look like that.

If you're getting sad over little things,
You should just think about me instead. ♪"

I knew this one—it was the girls' J-pop song Aika-san had sung at karaoke last week. Miku had remembered its lyrics and melody.

"♪ If you say something useless, something worthless,
and bring the mood down,
I'll run off to something fun, to something more
exciting, I won't forgive you for it. ♪"

The feeling I got from her singing was hard to explain. There was a power...not like she was straining herself by singing loudly, or anything. It was as if the atmosphere surrounding her was shining...and as I listened, I felt like I was being enveloped by that light.

"♪ *That's why*

I don't worry about it, about anything—
About fashion or friendship, or you.

It's no good to worry, about each and every thing,
If you don't keep your eyes on me, then I'll leave you.

Come at me with everything you have,
because it's a promise— ♪"

At some point while I was still reeling from her singing, the song finished and Miku started humming along to the next one.

"What's wrong, you two?" she interrupted her humming to ask.

I imagined the shock on my face had worried her. I looked next to me, and Yoruko's face was also frozen in disbelief.

"Nothing... It's just... You can *sing,* Miku!" I said. "It's the first time I've heard you do that, so I was surprised."

"She can do way more than sing!" said Yoruko. "That was amazing! I was *shaking!*"

"Listening to Jūhachi-san and Aika-san sing the other day made me want to sing, too!"

It was just like before: Miku observed me and the people around me and learned from us. That's how the field test had gone until now. From the beginning, it hadn't been worth being surprised about how she learned. Even I understood that.

And yet...

"Do you like singing, Miku?"

"Yes. When I listen to music, I get excited...and then, when I sing...It's like I become one with the music, and my heart beats really fast. It's a beautiful feeling." Miku declared this with a smile full of conviction, despite it only being her first time singing.

"Asano-san, can you play the first song again?" she said.

Moving the mouse, I returned to the first song that had played tonight. When it began, Miku started to sing once more.

Again, that singing voice felt tinged with warm light—

Up until then, I had never heard anything like it.

Even though it was her first time singing, Miku had that kind of voice—

The song ended again.

"Amazing... You're amazing, Miku-san. I've never heard a voice like yours..." Yoruko murmured, as if in a daze. As for me, I couldn't even mutter dazedly, but just stood there dumbfounded and immersed in the reverberations.

Then Miku spoke—slowly, as if considering on her words carefully.

"I see. I *wanted to sing.*"

After that, we played songs with vocals twice, repeating this format many times. No matter what the song was, after she heard it once, Miku had the lyrics and melody memorized perfectly, and would sing along the second time it played.

After Miku continued singing for awhile, Yoruko said, "I have a song to recommend." She took a CD out of her bag.

"Hold on a sec, give that to me," I said.

This was the first time Miku had seen a CD; there would be

trouble if Yoruko figured that out. Not only *that,* but I had no idea if there was a player at the place Miku went back to each day. With all that in mind, I ripped the music from the CD, copied it to an SD card, and placed it on a portable MP3 player for Miku.

"Take this, Miku. You can listen to music with this. Just put these around both your ears."

"Okay." Miku looked a little nervous. I turned on the player.

"Ah! I can hear it...The music is echoing inside my head!" It made me happy to see how pleased Miku was.

"Thank you, Asano-san, Yoruko-san. I'll take good care of this!"

"It's because I wanna hear you sing some more," Yoruko said. "If it's all right with you, it'd be nice if you'd memorize the songs on this CD and sing them for me next time."

"Sure! Let's sing them together!"

Miku really did love music. I wanted as much as I could to have her listen to more, to have her sing more—from now on, and if at all possible, that was what I wanted.

By the time I remembered the curry cooking on the stove, the onions had melted and the potatoes had lost all their shape. Yoruko complained about me mercilessly, but Miku seemed to be having fun as she broke off pieces of the roux and put them in the pot.

I would never forget the taste of that curry we ate together, nor anything else that happened that night.

Even while we ate, Miku's singing rang through my head. I didn't even need to close my eyes for the image of her

singing—with that carefree, blissful expression she made—to flood my mind.

Miku's singing voice and silhouette while she sang had taken hold of my heart.

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[06/27 WED 23:00]

After we ate, Miku went "home," and I helped Yoruko study a bit—although we didn't do very much. I didn't want her to stay up too late. Besides, Yoruko's grades were pretty good; she didn't really need my help studying, but she'd asked anyway.

I'd sent Yoruko to sleep in my bed, then spread out my spare blanket on the bamboo floor and laid down to sleep myself, when I heard her murmur, voice soft and forlorn, "I guess this means Onii's finally left home for good...Things'll never be the same anymore, especially now that Onii's got a girlfriend..."

So Yoruko thought that Miku was my girlfriend.

"Miku's not my girlfriend. It's nothing like that," I assured her. "And even if I *did* get a girlfriend, you wouldn't have to change how you are you around me."

I waited, but she didn't respond. It seemed she'd already fallen asleep.

Nevertheless...I'd never expected to hear 'Onii's finally left home for good' from Yoruko.

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[06/28 THUR 10:15]

"*Ueh...Hnnh...*Good morning!" Like me, Yoruko was good at getting up in the morning. She quickly unfastened her pajamas and began changing.

I turned away before issuing her a greeting in kind. "Hey, Yoruko. What're you gonna do since you don't have school today? You heading home now?"

"*Hm...*I know you have to go to school," she said hesitantly, "but since I came all this way, I was actually kind of hoping we could have some more fun before I left... Is that okay?"

While I fumbled for an answer, Yoruko finished changing, jogged to the entryway, sat down, and put on her shoes.

"Right, I get it," she said. "I didn't think you'd have enough time, anyway. I'll head home." The slump in her back radiated loneliness, and I knew I couldn't leave her like that.

"Wait," I said. "Wait. Attendance is optional at my morning classes today. You wanna grab lunch with me?"

Yoruko's smile seemed too big for her face as she turned and faced me. "By 'attendance is optional,' you mean you're going to skip class, right? Are you *sure* that's okay?"

"It's fine if it's just one day. I definitely need to go to my afternoon class, though. I wish I could spend more time with you today, but we can at least get lunch together."

Her whole face was beaming. We left the apartment and made for the same bridge as always. And, just like always, Miku was waiting for us.

"Asano-san, Yoruko-san, good morning!" Miku's smile was as bright as usual, even though I had an extra person with me. When I explained things to Miku, she cast me the same beaming smile Yoruko had and said, "I guess that means the three of us are getting lunch together today!"

"Onii, wait," said Yoruko, "you had plans with Miku to meet and go to school together? I'm sorry for intruding."

"*Ha ha ha!* Don't think like that—you're not intruding on anything," I insisted.

My little sister was becoming ever more mature...I guess that happens when you start middle school.

"In *that* case," she said, "I'm not gonna keep quiet about my request...I looked up this Italian restaurant in Roppongi Hills and want to go there for lunch."

Although she'd sounded demure when she brought up the restaurant, Yoruko had clearly researched the place before her visit in the hope that I'd take her there. She was shrewd—almost calculating—that way. But that was okay...or at least, it wasn't *horrible.*

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[06/28 THUR 12:20]

"That pizza was *delicious!* The gratin too—it was so warm and fluffy. Thank you for bringing me, Onii."

While lunch was hard on my wallet, Miku and Yoruko's enjoyment seemed compensation enough.

I'd called both Aika-san, who had no morning classes today, and Jūhachi, who happened to have a day off from his convenience store job, and both of them had happily joined us, making it a lunch date for five.

Yoruko had visited from time to time since my first year of college; she, my friends, and I would often have fun around Tokyo when she came. As such, both Jūhachi and Aika-san remembered her well.

"You know, Yoruko-chan," said Jūhachi as we left the restaurant, "you've gotten even cuter since last time I saw you! I'm gonna go ahead and reserve a date with you for five years from now!"

"*Heh heh heh,*" Yoruko tittered. "I'll think it over in five years."

As her brother, I didn't want Yoruko to go on a date with Jūhachi—not in five years, not in five *hundred.* That said, I thought her response had been pretty diplomatic; it seemed Yoruko was growing up.

"You're so well-rounded and confident, Yoruko-chan," Aika-san said. "I'd never peg you for Asano's little sister. *Heh heh heh!*"

Yoruko turned to me. "I can get home from here on my own, Onii. Good luck at school today!"

"*Hmm.* I don't really think I need luck for that," I told her, "but since you want me to do well, I guess I'll try extra hard today. But c'mon—I can walk you to the station, at least."

As soon as I said that, Yoruko grabbed my hand.

"What? Is something wrong?" I asked.

"My luck improves when I hold your hand." She squeezed

gently. "This is my good luck charm for my test tomorrow." It seemed this side of Yoruko hadn't changed. Even when she was a kid, she would follow me out to play, and hold my hand like she was doing now.

We'd only walked a few feet when Yoruko suddenly let go.

"Okay, I'm good now. Sorry, Onii. I shouldn't've done that in front of your girlfriend..."

Jūhachi jumped. "Huh? Did she say *girlf*—"

"*AHA HA HA HA!*" I cut him off, sounding shrill.

"What happened, Asano?" Aika-san asked suspiciously. This was bad. "Everyone's staring at us because you shouted, you know."

I quickly grabbed Yoruko's hand and pulled her away from the other three.

"Yoruko, Miku and I aren't like that. Please don't start rumors about us!"

"*Huh?* No matter how you look at it, it really looks like you're dati—"

"*Shh!* Wrong! You're wrong! Please just do this one thing for me, okay? Don't mention it!"

"Okay, what *is* your relationship, then?"

"...Cousins. Please say she's our cousin. And you can't say a *word* to Mom and Dad."

"Cousins...I got it. I'll keep it a secret."

"If you do, I'll reward you with sushi—my treat! It doesn't even matter if you want to go to Tsukiji or Ginza—I'll take you anywhere! Just *please* help me out!"

This time, Yoruko took my hand and returned us to the group.

"What were you two whispering about?" asked Aika-san.

"More importantly," said Jūhachi, "you said Miku was Asano's... *what* now?"

"Since Miku is Onii's cousin—and *my* cousin," Yoruko said, "I was just saying I want Miku to come visit us at home in Saitama next time we meet."

"Sure! I'd love to see Yoruko's house!" Miku said.

"Oh, that's all it was?" Aika-san asked.

"In that case, can Aika and I come, too?" asked Jūhachi. "Summer break's coming up soon, right?"

"N-Nah, it won't be any fun. We live in the middle of nowhere. *Aha ha...*" It looked like we'd dodged *that* bullet, at least. *Ugh,* this was bad for my heart.

"Okay, Onii, see you next time I come visit!"

"See you later, Yoruko," I said. "Oh, and Yoruko—it'd be a big help if next time you called to let me know you were coming."

We saw Yoruko off at the train platform and then took the subway back to Takadanobaba.

While Yoruko's surprise visits tended to throww my life into a tailspin, I always felt lonely when she left. Yoruko was family, after all.

"Yoruko-chan is cute," Miku said at school, during the break after third period.

"*Really?*" I laughed dryly. "Well, as her brother, I'm happy you think so."

"Not only that, but after Yoruko-chan finished eating, she had a piece of cheese stuck on the edge of her mouth, and when I

wiped it away she said, 'Thank you, Miku-san'!"

Now that she mentioned it, being with Yoruko had probably made Miku feel kind of like a big sister. It was an aspect of Miku I hadn't seen before.

"I envy Yoruko-chan."

"...Why?"

I happened to look over at Miku then, and her older-sister-esque expression had changed into that of a spoiled child.

"Because Yoruko-chan has been with you ever since she was born!"

"We—well. That's how it is since she's my sister, I guess."

"You both probably have lots of memories together."

"Right...because we're family."

"I want a lot of memories, too...!"

Miku had only been alive for a little over a week so far. She basically only had a week's worth of memories. It seemed that was why she was jealous of Yoruko. "But from here on out, you'll *also* be able to make a lot of memories," I said encouragingly.

"Yeah. That's right! Oh! Next time Yoruko-chan comes, I want to ask her about all of her memories of you, Asano-san!"

"My childhood stories are kind of embarrassing, so I'd really rather you didn't..."

"But I want those stories to become my memories, too!" Miku said with a grin.

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[06/30 SAT 21:45]

I stood at the bar preparing customers' drinks like usual, while Jūhachi served drinks beside me. Then, just as usual, when it was Jūhachi's shift, he headed to the DJ booth. The regular DJ left the stage, and Jūhachi replaced him in the booth.

All of this happened just as it always did.

And then Miku appeared beside Jūhachi.

The story that lead to this unusual turn of events had begun the previous night...

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[06/29 FRI 19:00]

I brought Miku to the club before it opened to see about getting her in during business hours.

"So you're saying you want me to let this girl into the club?" The club's main DJ, Jūhachi's mentor DJ Vpeak—V-san for short—asked. He stared intently at Miku as he spoke.

"I know the rules about minors are strict, but it's rare for Asano to push for something like this...Is there anything than can be done?" Jūhachi asked, backing me up.

"This girl... Miku really enjoys music, so I want her to experience it like it is at the club."

Miku stood next to me, smilingly brightly as usual.

"I'm sure both you and Jūhachi are aware we have to check IDs for everyone who comes into the club. If we just let in whoever we wanted, the club would get into trouble."

"....." I couldn't dispute that. What V-san had said was true; there was no room for argument.

"There's no way she can come here as a customer. There's no way I can negotiate that with the owner."

I stood there silent and unmoving. There was no room for argument. After a moment, I said, "...I understand."

When Professor Morisu had asked me to take Miku to the club, I, too, had told him it was impossible. But the blissful expression on Miku's face when she sang in my kitchen the previous night was engraved upon my memory, and wouldn't leave my thoughts. I wanted to give her the experience of this room packed to the brim with music. I wanted it intensely. That was why I'd asked V-san even though I knew it would be impossible. But it looked like the rules couldn't be changed.

"...I understand. I'm gonna go see her off, then I'll come straight back for my shift." Miku and I turned to head for the entrance.

V-san stopped us. "Hold up a second. Don't look so defeated. She can't come here as a *customer,* sure--but that doesn't mean there aren't *other* options."

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[06/30 SAT 21:50]

In the DJ booth, Jūhachi held his headphones up to one ear and looked for the right time to switch songs. Then, he slowly centered the crossfader. Next to him, Miku looked like she was

feeling good as she rocked back and forth to the beat. The customers on the floor were wrapped up in the music; only a few had noticed Miku standing there.

Jūhachi shifted the fader and changed the record. After about thirty seconds of the track had played, Miku picked up the mic.

Once again, Jūhachi moved the fader. The intro of the song from two nights ago—the one Miku and I listened to, the one that Miku had sung—began playing.

Miku started to sing. Her voice reverberated across the club.

It was a clear, bright voice, and sounded far more relaxed and comfortable than when Miku had sung in my room. The customers on the dance floor realized the vocals were live seemingly all at once, and looked up at the DJ booth. Miku didn't seem intimidated by so many people watching her—or more likely, she wasn't even aware they were looking. The entire club shook with excitement; it felt as if Miku and the song had become one, or as if Miku had herself become the song.

"Last night when you brought her, I thought that girl had something special, but I would never have guessed she had *this.*" I hadn't noticed, but DJ V-san must've come down to the bar at some point or another after his shift ended.

"Huh..." I came to my senses. "Oh, yeah. Thank you very much," I told him, flustered. "This is really thanks to you, for letting Miku into the club. For letting her sing, on top of that."

"I couldn't let her in here as a customer, but if she came as a performer, to sing, then things wouldn't be so cut and dry. Though. if you asked me whether doing this was *officially* okay,

I don't think I could answer that, *ha ha ha!*" V-san chuckled as he leaned over the counter and poured himself a beer. It seemed that's what V-san had meant when he'd said 'that doesn't mean there aren't other options': while Miku couldn't come in as a customer, she might be allowed to come in as a singer. Last night, Miku had sung an acapella chorus for V-san and passed her impromptu audition. Now, she was singing in the DJ booth.

"To be honest, I was in and out of a *lot* of different clubs back when I was seventeen, eighteen years old. I wanted to be a DJ. I couldn't get in as a customer, so I made appearances at any rare all-ages events clubs had, then afterwards I hung around the stage door to meet the performers... After that, they'd remember my face and give me a chance to spin in the booth." V-san gulped down his beer before continuing. "Obviously, if I tried dancing on the floor or drinking any alcohol, the DJ who'd vouched for me would've sacked me, so after I was done spinning a bit, I'd sit out back and just listen—but even that was fun."

"Even you had a period of time like that, huh?"

"Of course I did. I wasn't just dropped into this job without paying my dues, you know?"

Miku finished the song, and a boisterous cheer rose from the dance floor.

"If she keeps going like this, she'll hit it big someday," V-san said, looking at Miku and draining the rest of his beer glass.

"Eh? What do you mean by *that?*"

"I've listened to music a long time, and I've never heard anything like her. I don't know *any* vocalist who can sing like that."

"You're right," I admitted. "Miku's singing does have a...special something about it."

V-san set the empty glass on the counter and made his way to the dance floor, vanishing into the middle of the crowd. Jūhachi used a rhythm track to transition from the finished song for a few moments, before playing the intro of a pop song. In response, Miku brought the mic back to her lips. She sang as if to meet the raised expectations of the dancers before her. Their answering cheers swallowed the dance floor, but couldn't drown out the resonations of Miku's strong voice.

She was a mere creation of human hands...but her voice clearly made us all feel something special. Her dazzling, sparkling singing reverberated as if bathing the whole dance floor in its light.

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[07/01 SUN 12:50]

I woke up just after noon. As I brushed my teeth, I thought about last night at the club.

Miku had sung five songs, all of which she'd memorized when she visited my apartment. No matter which song she sang, however, the strength with which she sang them at the club was lightyears above what she'd used when she sang here. Her voice last night had been full of meaning, and sounded as if it could stretch on forever.

During our walk back to the bridge from the club, Miku's cheeks were flushed red with lingering excitement, and her

constant smile had been filled with satisfaction. I think my face looked the same.

I doubt I'd ever forget last night.

That wouldn't be the last of it, though. I wanted to hear Miku sing at the club again, and I thought Miku hoped for that, too. I decided to try and ascertain her feelings the next time we met. I was *sure* Miku wanted to sing there again.

As I was thinking about this, the doorbell rang.

I thought it might be Miku, and sure enough, when I opened the door, a smiling Miku was there to greet me.

"*Hee hee hee...* I'm here. Sorry." Her smile seemed embarrassed, and like she was hiding something.

"What brings you here out of the blue again?"

"Well...last night was so much fun, and I've never felt that good before, so..." As Miku spoke, she looked up slowly, as if remembering something. "I don't really understand why, but when I thought about last night, it made me want to see you."

"O-oh, really?" I was quite flustered; she'd wanted to see me without knowing why. "W-well um...we can't just stand here in the doorway. Wanna go grab lunch?"

"Sure! Let's go!"

I was surprised she'd suddenly come to see me, but deep down I might've been hoping for it—hoping for it because *I* wanted to see Miku, too.

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[07/01 SUN 13:40]

I wasn't sure what we to do once we had finished lunch. According to our *normal* schedule, after having lunch together, we'd head to school and attend afternoon lectures. But today was Sunday, which meant there weren't any lectures.

Since she had gone out of her way to come see me, it felt wrong to send her home right after lunch. I thought about bringing her back to my room to listen to music, but the weather was so beautiful that staying cooped up in my room all day seemed unhealthy no matter how I thought about it. Even considering just how much Miku liked music, I didn't think that was a good plan.

"...All right! Let's go to Harajuku," I said, determined. I had only ever been two or three times, but from my perspective, I was totally out of place on Takeshita Street on a Sunday. To be honest, going there would be a high hurdle to jump. But there was no doubt a girl Miku's age would enjoy the spectacle. I was sure Miku would enjoy it too.

"What are we going to do at Harajuku?"

"I got my paycheck last week, so let's buy you some clothes. And eat crepes!"

"Clothes and...crepes..." Miku made an expression as if reaching deep into her memory. It seemed like she was trying to find the definitions for "clothes" and "crepes." I became a little uneasy.

"Oh...unless, you know...you aren't interested in clothes and crepes. Should we try something different?"

Miku's cheerful expression returned in an instant.

"No, that's fine with me! I think it's a great idea! Besides..."

"Besides?"

"As long as I'm going with you, Asano-san, anywhere is fine with me!"

"I-is that so? *Ha ha ha...* That's good, then. *Hee hee.*" Quite a number of days had passed since Miku and I began doing things together, but she'd still managed to make me blush yet again. Miku's straightforwardness could be really embarrassing...but my happiness outweighed the embarrassment. Still, my face was bright red from ear to ear.

I stopped when we reached the front of Takadanobaba Station. "Miku, can you wait here a second? I'm gonna grab something to drink." I had gotten pretty thirsty. I was sure it was thanks to the extra-portion, extra-spicy green onion ramen I had just eaten.

"Got it," said Miku with a light wave as she stood in front of the bronze goddess statue. "Don't take too long!"

I jogged towards a vending machine. In an awkward turn of events, however, I had only a one thousand yen bill, and no change in my wallet. I tried going inside the station and to the newsstand, but for some reason, it was sold out of everything except milk and energy drinks. I was left with no choice but to head to the nearest convenience store, where I was finally able to grab a mineral water. When I returned to the statue, I was met with an unbelievable sight.

"Today, too, I hear a song,
I'm so happy, I can't hold back my own.

When the weather is nice, a song to the sun,
When the rain falls, a song pining for the sun."

Miku was singing.

Without accompaniment, or anything else. Nonetheless, her singing voice echoed softly, as if permeating and enveloping the area. It seemed she'd been mistaken for a street performer; a crowd had gathered around her. It probably was a bad idea to stand out this much during a secret field test, but...I slipped into the crowd and stood there listening for a moment, an audience member myself.

"Let's sing a song, feel the rhythm, clap your hands,
Let's sing a song, and grin as best you can."

The crowd broke into applause. Miku looked a little embarrassed, but still wore a satisfied smile as she made a slight bow to the crowd. With this, I finally returned to my senses and pushed my way towards Miku.

"Miku," I said, "why did you...*Ah.*"

Miku opened her outstretched hand and revealed the MP3 player she was holding.

"I was bored while I waited, so I listened to the music you and Yoruko-chan gave me. Then, when I listened, I thought up a new song."

"Wait...You *improvised* all that? *Wow.* I mean, it was really good." Normally, I wouldn't believe it, but...in Miku's case, it seemed possible.

"*Eh heh heh heh,* that makes me happy to hear."

Little by little, the crowd dispersed until there was no one else around.

"Okay, ready to get on the train?" I asked.

"Yeah!"

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[07/01 SUN 15:05]

Takeshita Street was as intensely congested as I'd thought it would be; the whole of it teemed with people.

"Wow! There are so many people!" Miku said wonderingly.

"Takeshita Street is fairly busy even on weekdays," I told her. "So since today's Sunday, it's even *more* crowded."

"There were a lot of people at the club last night, but here, there are people far as I can see—even though it's a *road!*"

At first I laughed at Miku's turn of phrase, "even though it's a road." But then I realized Miku had only been on roads around Takadanobaba before. Those roads were never so full of pedestrians that cars couldn't get through. Miku was just expressing what she saw, albeit in a strange and funny way.

"All right then, wanna buy some clothes?"

"Yeah!"

No sooner had Miku replied than a soft hand wrapped

around mine.

Miku was holding my left hand.

"Um... what are you doing?" I asked.

"I don't know why, but when Yoruko-chan came and I saw her hold your hand, I felt kind of jealous. I thought, 'having siblings must be nice.' So now I want to hold hands, too."

It seemed that she remembered me and Yoruko holding hands in Roppongi. Miku looked a little shy, even embarrassed, but didn't let go of my hand. Instead, she squeezed it tightly. "Let's go, Asano-san!"

And Miku dragged me onto Takeshita Street.

"Whoops! Excuse me—" I apologized to other pedestrians. "Miku, don't be in such a hurry!"

I squeezed Miku's hand without thinking and realized it was warm.

I remembered Professor Morisu saying, "This 'Hatsune Miku' may be an android, but we're utilizing CPU, memory, and data storage made from existing architectural forms for her data processing. The problem with that technology is their heat production, so we adopted a liquid cooling system. The system carries liquid coolant from the heat-generating devices all the way to her body's surface by utilizing a system of small tubes stretching throughout her, similar to human blood vessels. Once this coolant lowers the internal temperature, those devices resume operation."

Because of Professor Morisu's explanation, I understood logically why Miku had body heat. But the warmth of her skin felt

almost exactly like a human's—or at least I thought so, although I'd never dated and held hands with a girl before. The closest I'd ever gotten to something like this was dancing with my partner in the folk dances held after the school athletic meets.

"This is embarrassing..." I said to myself.

"What's wrong, Asano-san? What's 'overwhelming' you?"

"Oh, uh, nothing. I'm fine." I was far too mortified to admit I'd gotten excited just from holding hands with a girl.

"You can be strange sometimes, Asano-san. *Hee hee!*"

Miku cheerfully continued pulling us along with the flow of the slow-moving crowd. As we walked, we looked in store windows and at storefront mannequins from the myriad clothing stores.

"What kinds of clothes should we look at?" I asked Miku. "Is there anything you want?"

"What kinds of clothes do *you* like?"

She'd turned the question back on me. Unfortunately, I didn't even have confidence in the clothes I picked out for *myself,* much less any understanding of what a girl might want to wear. "*Hmm,*" I said, thinking. "Well...there are current trends and stuff, but I don't know them, and there's no way *you* would either. How about this: if you see something that makes you think, 'I want to wear that,' then we'll buy it."

"But what I want is to wear clothes *you* think look good on me!"

"Oh, is that how it is?" This was a huge problem for me, but it also made me indescribably happy...

"So, try your best to find something for me, okay?" Miku said.

I felt very happy to hear her say that and said, "All right!" I hadn't expected to enjoy this outing so much.

While in such good spirits, my gaze drifted to a nearby clothing store—and its mannequin's pure white top and pastel orange, suspendered skirt. We went into the shop.

"Well? Does it suit me?" Miku asked a few minutes later, pulling back the fitting room curtain with a hint of shyness in her eyes.

"Yeah, it does. It looks cute." Both the top and the skirt looked *really* good on her; the other customers, even some of the staff, kept stealing glances in our direction. While Miku would look great in *anything,* I was happy she was wearing clothes I'd picked out for her myself.

"Thank you, Asano-san! I'm going to wear these for the rest of the day!"

The clerk effortlessly cut the tags off the new clothes, then carefully folded Miku's old outfit and put it into a bag for us.

We saw bunch of crepe places at a crowded intersection a short walk from the clothing store, so we took a break to eat.

"I want to wear this forever!" Miku said, cramming a crepe into her mouth.

"*Ha ha!* If you want to go *that* far, then I think we did well buying that outfit. But you can't just wear the same clothes every day, you know."

"Okay, then I'll wear this whenever we go out when we're not at school!"

"Thanks," I said, touched. "That makes me happy."

It hadn't been cheap, but to think: she was so delighted over *one* outfit. My split-second decision to bring her to Harajuku had been right on the money.

"Is the crepe tasty, Asano-san?"

"Yeah. It's good and sweet."

"Is that right? So, crepes are sweet. And that means they're tasty. I'll keep that in mind."

Now that I thought about it, I hadn't had Miku try any desserts or sweets before. This crepe was her first experience with both. Miku nodded in understanding while she ate.

"Where are we going next?" she asked when she'd finished eating.

"*Hmmm.* I was thinking it might be time to head home."

The clock hands showed it was almost four o'clock. According to our normal weekday pattern, it was about time to send Miku home. But—

"No," said Miku.

"Huh?"

She looked disappointed. "I want to go to more places and have more fun," she pestered.

She had looked so happy up until the point I'd said it was time to go that I *also* began to think I couldn't let the day end here. But I had no clue where to take her. This wasn't a situation I was used to being in, but I kicked my brain into high gear nevertheless.

"...I got it!" I said after a few moments. "Let's head to the

amusement park! If we take a short train ride, there are places open there until nighttime!" It was another spur-of-the-moment idea, but I had a feeling things would keep going well today. I wanted to ride that momentum to the end.

That and...I would be lonely if I sent her back home now.

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[07/01 SUN 16:55]

"Asano-san," Miku said, "what's that thing that's spinning around?"

"That's the 'merry-go-round'," I replied.

"Let's go on it!"

And later: "Over there," Miku said, "what's that railroad track with all the twists and turns?"

"That's a roller coaster. See, look: that car everyone got in is running along the track now. But just so you know, that ride's kind of scary."

"I still want to go on it!"

Still later, Miku said, "Look! Something is falling from the top of that tower!"

"That's the parachute tower," I said. "Want to get on?"

"Of course!"

We continued like this, riding the different park attractions one after another. No matter which ride we got on, Miku laughed nonstop with the joy and elation of a child. And while I had to clench my teeth to get through the roller coaster, Miku absolutely loved it.

Miku's elation at anything I did with her seemed very similar to Yoruko's—but even then, I noticed a crucial difference.

My heart pounded whenever I watched Miku enjoy herself, and it felt as if I was blushing all the way to my bones. I was only like this with Miku, and it was a brand-new experience for me.

"All right," I said at last, "it's getting dark. We should head back for real this time."

"Okay," Miku allowed, smiling faintly. "I *do* want to stay longer, but I guess we've done enough for today."

I wondered when she'd learned phrases like "I guess we've done enough for today." She was steadily becoming more and more human-like.

Not only that—*my* mind was changing, too. My heart was growing steadily fonder of Miku.

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[07/01 SUN 20:45]

On the bridge, Miku and I waited for the black car to arrive.

"Once the car gets here, we'll have to say goodbye for today," Miku said.

"I know tomorrow is your day off," I told her, "but we'll get to see each other again Tuesday."

"Yeah...but you know," Miku said, gazing into my eyes, "what I really want is to be with *you,* Asano-san. For always—for ever and ever."

I laughed nervously. "I'm happy to hear you say that, but you

know, going out to a lot of different places, like we did today, isn't something we can do *every* day."

I'd never seen Miku make such a pained expression.

"It's true that I want to go to a lot of different places," she said, "but that's different. If I could just stay with you, then nothing else—"

Miku broke off as her car arrived.

"See you later, Asano-san!" she said, wearing her customary smile as she waved goodbye from inside the car. But her expression looked a little forced, like she was putting on an act.

For a few moments after the car drove off, I stared vacantly at the surface of the river, thinking. Miku had told me she wanted to be with me forever. I didn't need to scrutinize myself to know I felt the same way about Miku. I knew this was a field test for an android, but every day I thought about that fact less and less. Was I going to be okay?

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[07/03 TUES 10:15]

"We *finally* get to hang out!" Miku cried, running to me from the middle of the bridge.

While I more or less understood what she was trying to say, I couldn't help laughing at her strange reply. "*Ha ha*--you're exaggerating. You know it's only been a day, right?" I pointed out.

"Has it really?" she asked.

"I mean, you didn't say anything like that when we met last Tuesday."

"That's because my feelings are different than they were last week."

It was an idle, silly conversation. Thinking about it objectively, it was impressive that a non-human entity like Miku could so smoothly engage in such conversation, but I'd already lost all sense that something was odd about her. Besides, even though I'd called out her exaggeration, I had also been anxiously waiting to see her again, and had felt like yesterday dragged on awfully long.

"Today's Tuesday, so that means that we have classes before lunch, right?" Miku said.

"Yeah, that's right," I said. Only about half a month had passed since I'd met Miku, yet it seemed she'd already memorized my entire schedule.

"In that case," she said, "we're going to eat lunch in the cafeteria today, right?"

"That's right. *Hmmm.* I wonder what I should eat today," I mused.

"Asano-san, even though you're thinking about it now, won't you still just end up eating green onion ramen with extra onion again?"

"Ah, w-well that might happen, but it's not a done deal."

"*Ah ha!* But you always like eating it when we go to the school cafeteria, so I bet you'll end up ordering the same thing again today, too!"

Okay, so she'd not only memorized my schedule, she'd learned my food preferences, as well. I had easy enough tastes to

figure out though, so my food preferences were probably pretty obvious. Regardless, it seemed Miku and I had grown quite accustomed to one another. Even our pace as we walked to school had shifted to something comfortable for us both.

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[07/03 TUES 12:40]

After I finished the noodles I'd ordered for lunch at the cafeteria, I gulped down the rest of the soup and onions, enjoying the harmonious textures of both the crunchy and softened parts of the onions. Inside my mouth, their flavors melted together perfectly with the soup's: part of green onion ramen's appeal, for me.

"*You* certainly look happy, Asano-san!" Miku said.

I lifted my head to find her looking at me like an older sister contentedly watching a much younger sibling eat a snack.

"Asano's usually so detached," said Aika-san, "but give him green onion ramen, and suddenly he starts looking strangely euphoric."

"I know, right?" Jūhachi chimed in. "No matter what happens in his life, Asano would probably be okay with it if you gave him some green onion ramen. He's a simple dude."

"....." Great. Jūhachi and Aika-san were saying weird things about me again, but I knew fighting back would be a pain. More specifically, I knew if I said anything, I'd be lampooned with ten or a hundred times the energy they teased me with now...so I kept quiet.

"So, Miku-chan," said Aika-san, "what's that you're eating, exactly?"

I looked up at Miku's plate saw a huge pile of green onions piled onto—curry? "Wh-what?" I stammered. "Is that...? Uh, Miku, what *are* you eating?"

"It's Onion Fest Curry! I asked the cafeteria person for it and they gave me an extra big serving of green onions!"

"But Miku—remember what I said about how combining them with ramen demonstrates their full potential, but that putting them in curry won't work the same way? Just like how we didn't add green onions to the curry the other night, you know?"

"That was different," Miku countered. "Boiling and putting them in curry isn't the same as eating them as a topping. This curry's surprisingly good!"

"Nope. You're wrong. Curry and green onions don't go well together—*at all.* They're a complete mismatch! They're like a monthly manga magazine where all the chapters are only ten- to fifteen pages long, and all the stories are focused on plot and have no jokes."

Aika-san frowned. "Another incomprehensible metaphor..."

"I don't know. I think it's pretty easy to understand," I said.

"I kinda get what you're tryin' to say." Jūhachi said, backing me up.

"Yes, yes," Miku agreed, "I understand what Asano-san's saying. At least, I *think* I do!"

"Well then, I admire everyone's comprehension skills," Aika-san said, sighing.

"Got it, Miku?" I said. "From now on, put green onions in your ramen, *not* your curry. "

"But I still think this is pretty good!" insisted Miku. "If you gave it a try, you'd agree!" She stretched out a spoonful of the Onion Fest Curry for me to try.

"No way, stop, I'm good! I'm *definitely* not trying that!"

Not only did she stop reaching for me, she dropped the spoonful of curry entirely.

"Huh?" Aika-san and Jūhachi looked as confused as I felt.

Miku picked her spoon back up to keep eating.

"Miku, wait," I cut in. "That spoon's dirty now. Don't use it anymore. Hand me that one; I'll go get you a new one."

"Okay...I'm sorry, Asano-san."

I grabbed a new spoon and handed it to Miku, who looked a little dejected.

"Did you drop your spoon because..." I struggled to think up a lie. "You know, because you fell asleep at the table with your head in your arms, and your right hand fell asleep because it was at the bottom? That's it, right?"

"I didn't fall asleep!"

"She's not like you," Jūhachi said. "She doesn't do that. I should know—I've been right next to her this whole time."

Thanks to Jūhachi, the atmosphere lightened up a little, and Miku collected herself and resumed eating.

Nevertheless, Miku dropping a spoon like that made her seem all the more human.

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[07/03 TUES 19:30]

Once afternoon lessons ended and I'd seen Miku off, Aika-san and I finished up the day's required test items at the research lab. I was off work that night, so I headed straight home from the lab. The sun had set completely, and the street lamps radiated sparse light into the night. Down the path, a familiar silhouette appeared: a person standing with their back to the street lamps.

"...If you keep walking around by yourself at night, you're probably gonna run into trouble," I called out as I approached.

"I'll be fine," the shadowy figure replied in a familiar voice.

It was Miku, just as I thought.

"Really?" I said, smiling broadly. "In that case, wanna go get dinner?" Even though I'd scolded her for walking around alone at night, I was happy she'd come to see me.

Miku nodded with a smile. "Sure." She jogged over...and lost her footing just as she reached me. She started to fall.

In the blink of an eye, I'd stepped forward and caught her. "Whoops...careful," I said with a laugh. "There's no need to rush, I'm sure some restaurants are still open."

I lifted Miku back up by her shoulders.

"Um...uh..." Miku seemed perplexed. She'd only tripped—why did she look so troubled? As I mulled over what could be wrong, Miku collapsed into me, burying her face in my chest and wrapping her arms around me. She seemed to be holding onto to

me with all her strength.

"Ho-hold on a sec, Miku...w-what are you...doing?"

"I...I don't know. I don't know, but...I can't move my legs."

Miku had put her body into my hands, was trusting me not to let her fall.

I couldn't move either. "It-It's okay," I stammered, "it's okay. Tripping surprised you—you're probably just a little shaken up. Once you've calmed down, you'll be able to stand up like normal."

Despite what I told her about being calm, I was pretty shaken up myself. I had never experienced anything like this before. Miku was staring up at me with cheeks flushed pink, and even through her clothes, I could feel the warmth and softness of her body.

"A-Asano-san...Can I stay like this for a moment...? I still can't move."

My heart was racing. My face was probably as red as Miku's.

"...Sure, it's okay." I'd been leaning backwards slightly, but now I stood straight and supported Miku's body. My shift threw Miku off balance, but I kept her from toppling backwards by wrapping my arms around her. I patted her back lightly in reassurance.

"Asano-san..." The weight of Miku's body against my chest began to ease. It seemed like Miku was gradually regaining control of her body.

"Do you think you're about ready to stand on your own?"

"Yeah...I think. But..." She didn't try to extricate herself. Her legs must still have been unsteady. "I'm okay now," she admitted, "but I want to stay like this just a little bit longer."

Miku's arms around my back gripped still more tightly.

"Eh...um...why?"

"....."

My question was met with a silence that felt awfully long. My heart, which had begun to settle down, suddenly ratcheted past its previous speed to pound hard in my chest.

"...I want to be with you like this forever," said Miku, breaking the silence. "I want to be close to you."

"B-but, y-you know, close d-doesn't have to mean c-clinging like this."

"Really? I want us to be like this forever." Miku blushed when she met my eyes. "Do you not like being with me like this, Asano-san?"

Miku wasn't leaning on me anymore; she seemed to be able to support herself again. And yet her hands still held tightly to my back.

"I-It's not...that I-I...don't like..." I wasn't sure if my voice was choking up because I was choosing my words carefully, or because I was trying to make sure of my feelings.

Then my phone vibrated. "Ho-hold on a sec! My phone's ringing!" I said, struck with a complicated mix of regret and relief. I pulled my cell phone from my pocket reflexively, and raised it to my ear.

Miku seemed reluctant as she withdrew her arms and took a few steps back.

"Shinosato-kun?" the caller asked.

"M-Morisu-sensei?!"

Professor Morisu was calling me! His voice was so calm and collected, I couldn't tell whether he was aware of what had just

happened. "I wanted her to have dinner with you again tonight," he said, "but we need to stop here. My apologies."

"Huh? That's...sure, okay..."

While we spoke, the usual black car arrived on the other side of the bridge.

"I'm sorry to keep imposing on you like this," the professor was saying, "but something's come up that we need to check on immediately."

"....." I watched Miku while I listened to the professor. She was flanked by two men in suits, who led her to the car.

"I hope this doesn't give you a bad impression of the project. I would like you to continue working with me."

"...I understand," I said absently, but by the time I hung up, Miku was already inside the car.

Miku's eyes followed me through the window as the car pulled away.

I stood there, watching her go.

I could still hear Miku's words inside my head.

"I want us to be like this forever."

"Do you not like being with me like this, Asano-san?"

I hadn't been able to answer her though. I couldn't make myself confess how I was feeling: "I want to stay with you forever, too. I want to be close to you. I can't help thinking about you."

I didn't understand what that feeling was. If I had to explain it to someone, they might call it "love." But the person I felt it for wasn't human, so it was probably highly unusual to think like I was. Even I understood that. But whether it was logic or common

sense, I think it was precisely because of their niggling presence that I'd held back my confession.

But I was wrong to have yielded to common sense. Instead, I should have followed my heart.

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[07/04 WED 10:15]

It was our regular meeting time, but Miku wasn't on the bridge. I wondered if she was just running late.

I stood in the middle of the span and gazed vacantly at the surface of the water. I wasn't really looking at anything, but it probably seemed like I was. Last night, I'd had a hard time getting to sleep; I couldn't stop thinking about how Miku and I parted. That night's events were still swirling around my head.

I wondered what expression Miku would greet me with today, and how best to greet her myself. I couldn't put my thoughts in order.

Then, my phone vibrated.

"Good morning, Shinosato-kun." It was Professor Morisu again.

"I need to talk to you about Hatsune Miku...The readings from our tests yesterday were higher than we expected, so there's a significant amount of data we now need to analyze. I am therefore halting the field test for today."

"Halting the field test...?" I repeated, stupefied by my lack of sleep.

"We'll spend today thoroughly checking her systems and resume the field test as usual tomorrow. Which means, when that time comes, I'll be counting on you again."

"...Um." A question rose up through the fog in my head. "Is Miku not feeling well?"

"Feeling well...I assume you mean the android's current status? No major malfunctions have arisen."

The professor had said "malfunction" as if he was talking a broken down machine; it rubbed me the wrong way. But if I thought about it calmly, *I* was probably the one saying something strange. Miku was the subject of this experiment, and I was merely the field test operator. Nevertheless...

"If that's the case," I said, "isn't halting the field test unnecessary? Maybe we could just resume in the afternoon, or later, maybe." I was probably refusing to accept what he said because I wanted to see Miku.

"While I'm glad you're so enthusiastic about trying to make progress with the field test, I believe I just explained to you why Hatsune Miku can't go out today. I have nothing more to say on the matter."

"....." He'd shut me down so hard, I couldn't quickly come up with a counterargument.

"Just to be sure, I want to make something abundantly clear," Professor Morisu said. "This is a field test. You are a collaborator in said field test. That does not mean you own Hatsune Miku."

The professor pressed me even further until I gave in and said, "...Yes, I understand."

"I'm relieved to hear that," he said. "Once again, I'll be counting on you as we move forward."

He hung up, and I walked to school with my head still in a fog. From force of habit, I went through the motions of attending my lectures, going to the research lab, and then heading to work.

Anything and everything I did that day, I did in a daze.

I'd been reminded that this field test would end someday. It was something that I'd been aware of before the test began—but for some reason, I'd completely forgotten about it. Now, today, I remembered: Miku and I wouldn't always be together.

It was impossible to not to see this now. Even if I ignored it, time would keep marching on. And then, someday, the day she and I would have to part for good would come along.

That was why I had to tell her the truth about my feelings quickly—just like Miku had always done for me.

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[07/05 THUR 11:30]

The next day, I made my way towards the bridge where we always met. My legs felt heavy, probably because of the strange restlessness I was feeling.

Despite this, Miku stood in the center of the bridge like always, oblivious to my unease.

"Hello, Asano-san." Miku's smile as she came to greet me was the same as ever, and I felt suddenly relieved. My nervousness fell away.

This time, *I* was the one saying what Miku had said two days earlier. "We *finally* get to hang out again, huh."

"You're exaggerating. You know it's only been a day, right?" Miku seemed like her usual self, and had even echoed the line I used two days earlier when she answered me.

Unconsciously, a warm grin spread across my face. "All right then," I said. "What should we have for lunch today?"

"I'm fine with whatever you want, Asano-san."

Our conversation felt the same as it had been two days again, and as usual, we headed towards Takadanobaba Station.

I chose a hamburger place on the first floor of the Seibu-Shinjuku station building for lunch. "Is yours good, Miku?" I asked after we'd sat down with our food.

"Yeah." Miku seemed to be enjoying her hamburger even without a sense of taste, as she opened her mouth wide and ate with vigor. This, too, seemed the same as ever.

I wondered what the urgent maintenance had been for. Nothing seemed odd or unusual as we ate lunch together. I supposed that meant that the maintenance had gone well. But what, exactly, had gone wrong?

"What's the matter, Asano-san?" Miku asked, peering at me.

I realized Miku had finished her hamburger, and seemed worried that I'd been sitting silently lost in thought for some time now. The music inside the restaurant helped fill the awkward silence before I finally replied, "*Ah,* sorry. It's nothing. Should we head to school?"

"Yeah, let's go."

The same movements as always. The same Miku as usual. But my earlier sense of relief was slipping. Our everyday routine would end someday. That's why, before it ended, I had to tell her how I felt.

I would say the words I hadn't been able to confess when we'd parted two days ago. I would make sure Miku knew about my feelings for her.

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[07/05 THUR 13:55]

We sat together in the lecture hall. As I quietly took notes, Miku was also copying the professor's writing on the blackboard down into her notebook. It was the same as always—and right as I thought so, I heard something small hit the floor.

"*Ah...*" It was Miku. She'd dropped her mechanical pencil.

I picked it up and passed it to her.

"Th-thank you..." she said.

I had no idea why she looked so flustered. All she had done was drop her pencil, yet she'd reacted as if things were serious.

By third period break, Miku had returned to her usual self, and nothing out of the ordinary happened during the fourth period lecture either. So while I was initially curious, by the end of class, I had forgotten about her strange behavior. Moreover, my head was crowded with thoughts of what I planned to confess later on.

After classes ended, I went down to the first floor with Miku to see her off.

"See you tomorrow, Asano-san," Miku said, smiling through her goodbyes.

"Miku, wait!"

"*Hm?* What is it?"

I was going to say it. I was going to tell her how I felt about her. "Miku...you know how the other day...you know...you said that you 'wanted to stay with me forever'?"

"The other day...yeah...the other day...I said...I didn't want to go ho—" As she spoke, Miku reached out and slowly grabbed hold of my wrist. Her hand squeezed, trembling ever so slightly, as if saying any kind of separation would be too painful to bear.

"I...I'm..." I had never in my life experienced such nervousness before. I couldn't piece my words together properly. But I had to say it.

As I breathed in, determined, Miku opened her mouth. "Didn't want...go...home..." she stuttered. "Time to go home... Ho-ho-me...didn't. Wa. Home. Didn't. Go home."

"Mi-Miku?!"

The hand gripping my wrist had gone from slightly trembling to her whole arm shaking violently, and the expression on Miku's face was one I'd never seen before. She seemed terrified, or in the grips of a major panic attack.

"Wh-what's going on, Miku? Are you okay?" I didn't understand what was happening. All I knew was that Miku was frightened, scared. I wanted to help, but I had no clue what to do. My panic increased with each passing second.

But it didn't have very long to build.

"*Ah!*" I cried as the two men in suits who always picked Miku up suddenly appeared on either side of her.

They grabbed Miku's wrist and tore her hand from the hem of my clothes. They never said a word, just grabbed Miku by the shoulders, turned her around, pushed and dragged her to the car, and stuffed her inside.

The car sped off, leaving me behind.

For a while, I just stood there.

That's when the professor called. "There's been a tiny bit of trouble," he said at once. "I'm putting the field test on hold from Friday through Sunday. Since her scheduled maintenance is on Monday, I'll be depending upon your help again starting next Tuesday."

I couldn't believe Miku's fearful reactions had been just "a tiny bit of trouble." I had a mountain of questions I wanted to ask, but after our last phone conversation, I knew Professor Morisu wouldn't respond to a single one. All I could do was say, "Understood," before I hung up the phone.

I was frustrated that that there was nothing *more* that I could do.

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[07/10 TUES 10:15]

It felt like time had stopped for those four days without Miku.

I still had no idea what had happened. Miku *had* been strange last week, but I'd never found out anything else, and in any event,

the field test was set to resume today. I was still gripped with uncertainty as I made my way to the bridge.

And there was Miku, standing on the bridge just like always.

"Good morning, Asano-san," she said. Despite her strange behavior a few days prior, she looked completely normal again.

Still, I wondered: was she *really* okay? Miku's body might still be in bad shape; she might still be healing. I was worried enough that I decided to ask her directly. "Miku...It was pretty scary what happened the other day. Are you feeling better now?"

Miku looked slightly puzzled by my question. "Um...It's nothing to worry about."

".....?" A shiver ran up my spine. I felt like the ground had shaken beneath me. "No, I mean, you know, when we said goodbye to each other last Thursday..."

"Oh," she said. "That wasn't anything to worry about. There are no more problems, so I'm okay now." But Miku wouldn't look me in the eye when she said this.

What was this strange feeling I'd gotten when she spoke?

"Asano-san, we need to head to school, or we'll be late."

"Oh, right..." At her insistence we began walking, but things still didn't make sense to me. Did Miku not want me to ask about what happened last Thursday?

"Today, we have class in the morning," she said just like usual, "and then after that, we're going to eat lunch in the cafeteria, right?"

"...Yeah, that's right." Although our conversation focused on the usual things, it felt like something between us had cooled. Miku was always so happy and warm, even over simple things like

lunch, but she had none of that air about her now. To top it off, she hadn't *once* met my eyes. She'd never avoided my gaze before. When we met in the mornings, Miku *always* met my eyes.

Yet today, Miku acted like she was trying to deceive me—or as if she was hiding something.

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[07/10 TUES 12:25]

During class, I couldn't focus on the lecture.

I was too focused on Miku. But there was nothing different about her as she quietly took notes beside me. It was as if only time had passed, and Miku was no different than she'd been last week.

I wondered if my discomfort that morning was just because I'd gotten the wrong impression.

Lunch was the same too; Miku ate her food the same way she had last week. She ate spoonfuls of gratin just as naturally and smoothly as ever.

"You're having gratin today, *huh,* Miku-chan," said Aika-san. "Be careful not to burn your mouth."

"Thank you, Aika-san."

"Sweet, this is my chance!" Jūhachi broke in. "I'll blow on your gratin for you!"

"That's highly necessary," Aika-san snapped.

"It's okay, Jūhachi-san," Miku told him, "I can eat this by myself."

"I see," he said. "That's good, I guess, but I can't help but feel a tinge of regret..."

As was my custom—or rather, my habit—I was eating ramen with extra green onions. But my green onion ramen, so tasty I thought I'd never tire of it no matter *how* much I ate, had suddenly lost its appeal.

My worries seemed to have dulled my appetite.

Meanwhile, our lunchtime conversation was the same as usual, and nothing out of the ordinary happened.

Despite this, I wondered why I felt like I was stuck watching Miku through a frosted glass windowpane.

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[07/10 TUES 15:15]

When afternoon lectures were over, I went down to the first floor to see Miku off at the school entrance.

I kept seeing last Friday's events, when she'd been taken away, in my head. She'd definitely acted strange that day. And when she grabbed my wrist and said she didn't want to go home, she'd looked terrified, and almost like she was pleading with me. Unease tightened my chest.

But for some reason, Miku behaved now as if those events had never happened.

"Asano-san, is something the matter?" Miku looked at me worriedly.

I decided to be brave and ask her about it directly. I couldn't

shake the feeling that Miku was holding back, like there was something she wasn't telling me. I wondered what she was hiding. "Miku, is it possible that you—"

Right then, an unexpected interruption appeared.

"Onii, I came back!" Standing in the entrance was Yoruko.

"*Huh?!*" I gaped. "What are you doing at my school?"

"Colleges have open campuses, right? I'm allowed to be here." While what she said was true, it didn't explain why she'd shown up out of the blue.

"Well, yeah, that's true, I guess. But it doesn't tell me *why*..."

"My tests are over, and now it's post-finals break, so I came here. Miku-san also promised to sing for me, so I thought today might be perfect timing."

Yoruko *had* asked Miku to sing with her last time she was here. Miku had been pretty enthusiastic about it, too. This might be a good opportunity, I thought—if I could manage it, maybe I could skip the research lab for the day and go out to sing with Yoruko and Miku. And if Miku *did* have something difficult to tell me, she might be more willing to speak once singing had cheered her up.

"Miku-san," Yoruko said, "do you remember my CD? It'd be fun if I could sing that with you."

"That's a good idea," I said immediately. "I can take a day off from the lab once in a while. Miku, come—"

She cut me off right as I started to invite her. "I don't...I don't think I'm really in the mood."

I gazed at Miku's clouded, apologetic profile in disbelief.

"Huh? Why not?" asked Yoruko.

"I can't really sing...today..."

I was speechless at the sheer unexpectedness of Miku's statement.

"*Huh?* Oh, are you not feeling well today?" Yoruko said. "That's too bad. Maybe another time..."

It took all that I had to tell Yoruko, "Yeah...we'll go another time..."

"In that case, here are some presents." Yoruko took two CDs out of her bag and handed them to me and Miku. "I bought you a CD, to thank you for hanging out with me last time and for letting me listen to your wonderful singing. This is my all-time favorite CD—I listen to it every day. It'd be nice if you and Onii listened to it a bunch and memorized it. Then, we could all sing it together."

"Thank you..." said Miku. "I love listening to music, so I'll listen to it a lot." But Miku took the CD without a hint of happiness in her expression. "Asano-san, Yoruko-chan, I'm going to go home for today." Leaving us with that, Miku got into the car that had come to pick her up and disappeared down the road.

Yoruko frowned. "She looked so *happy* singing that night. When she said, 'I can't sing today'...I just found that kinda hard to believe. I think she was lying. It's just a hunch, though..."

"A lie? Miku *lied* to me?" The moment Yoruko said it, I denied it, thinking, *There's no way—Miku has no reason to lie to me.* The more I thought about it, however, the less unreasonable Yoruko's impression seemed. Miku *had* been acting strange for the past few days. I couldn't definitively rule out the possibility that she'd been lying to me.

"I wonder if there's a problem she can't tell you about," Yoruko continued. "She looked like she was hiding something."

Problems... Hiding something? If Miku—who was always positive, and always spoke and acted according to her true feelings—was suddenly troubled, or burdened by something, I was sure that *something* must have happened during the few days we weren't allowed to see each other because of her maintenance.

If that was true, what if she'd been forbidden from telling me what that something was?

Yoruko seemed worried about me as I stood silently, lost in thought. "I'm gonna go home, Onii," she said at last. "You don't seem like you're in a great mood either." Yoruko looked lonely and downcast as she said goodbye.

I tried to recover. "My bad, Yoruko. Come visit again, okay? I'll take you out for sushi next time, I promise."

"Okay, I will. I can't wait to come back!" she called as she headed off.

I stood alone at the school's entrance for a while after that, unable to move while my thoughts whirled around in my head.

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[07/10 TUES 16:20]

Yoruko's words had only substantiated the sense that something was wrong; it was a niggling feeling that just wouldn't go away. Miku *was* hiding something, and the only person I could reach to confirm this was Professor Morisu.

Although I'd made up my mind, I couldn't quite keep my nerves in check; I was gripping my cell phone far too tightly when I called the professor.

The phone rang three and a half times before I heard his serious voice in my ear: "It's rare for you to call me, Shinosato-kun. Is something the matter?"

Just what was going on with Miku—that was what I wanted to know, and Professor Morisu was the only person I could ask about her being a man-made android and potentially get some answers. Questioning him was my only shot. Of course, I had no way of knowing whether he'd actually tell me the truth. Still, he might at least give me a clue.

"Morisu-sensei," I began, "Miku was acting kind of strange today. Did something happen while she was gone?"

"That's rather vague. Can you explain the strangeness in more detail?"

"The other day, you said there was some 'trouble,' right? Is it possible Miku still isn't fully reco—"

That was it! *That* was the moment she started acting strange!

But the professor cut me off—just talked right over me. "The trouble from the past few days was only a slight problem. It won't have any effect on the field test or the android's developmental plan. Hatsune Miku is currently performing in accordance with our calculations."

That couldn't be true, I thought—no way was all that "a slight problem." Not only that, but...

"Well, there's also...Unlike before, it almost feels like she's

trying to keep her distance from me now...and I can tell she's hiding something..."

"That's a bit too subjective," said Professor Morisu brusquely. "First of all, what, specifically, has led you to believe Hatsune Miku is 'trying to keep her distance' from you?"

"Well, I mean, up until now Miku's always treated me..."

"Treated you?"

"Well, that's...Miku has always..." I couldn't finish my sentence. I couldn't tell him, "Miku should be acting more affectionate towards me."

Before I could think of something to say instead, the professor retorted, "Making a statement without conclusive evidence isn't admirable, Shinosato-kun. Even if I entertained such extrapolations, I see no grounds for such speculation here. Understand this: the role we are asking you to perform is that of a field tester. I must reiterate: you're to do nothing more and nothing less than that." He hung up the phone.

It was just as one-sided a conversation as it had been before: he'd evaded all my questions, and managed to avoid the heart of the matter entirely.

There was definitely something the professor didn't want to tell me, and it wasn't just about Miku's technical specifications. I was positive the reason Miku seemed so off was because of an exchange she'd had with the professor—one I didn't know about.

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[07/10 TUES 20:30]

That night at the club, I served drinks at the bar as usual...except I'd already gotten three people's orders wrong.

"Take it easy, I'll cover for you today," Jūhachi said, standing next to me. I couldn't even compose myself enough to thank him; I could only depend on him for now. And so time passed, although I had no sense of whether it moved quickly or slowly.

Two versions of Miku cycled endlessly through my head: the oddly distant Miku of that day, and the Miku of a few days prior, who'd held onto me tightly while we stood on the bridge.

One by one, I sifted through my interactions with Miku between those two points, asking myself whether any of my words or actions had caused her change in behavior. Nothing I'd done came to mind.

Up until last Tuesday, Miku had been the same as always. On that particular day, however, Miku had expressed her feelings to me much more strongly than before. It was right at that moment that Professor Morisu had called my cell phone.

Wednesday had been her unscheduled maintenance day. And thinking about it now, something had already been different about Miku last Thursday morning. When I questioned her before we'd gone our separate ways, she got choked up—which had never happened before—like she was terrified of me leaving her. It seemed that very fright had awoken a problem even more troublesome than the first, because after that had been *four* days of unscheduled maintenance.

And then—today. Miku's response to the idea of "singing"

was completely different from her usual reaction.

Miku had always shared her feelings with me. I'd decided to share mine and be honest with her as well. It didn't matter to me that she wasn't human. And yet, despite my decision, Miku had suddenly changed.

The timing was just too perfect: the phone call I received from the professor; the successive maintenances.

Maybe they weren't *allowing* Miku to have romantic feelings.

Professor Morisu must've needed me to be an unobtrusive presence in his experiment. He'd allowed Miku to feel emotions, but perhaps he thought Miku's *special* feelings for me—and only me—would ultimately prove a hindrance to the field test.

That was probably what was really going on.

I'd worked so haphazardly all shift, I felt kind of bad that I was getting paid for it, but as I left that night, DJ Vpeak-san called out to me. "Hey, Asano-kun, can I talk to you for a sec?"

After my abysmal shift performance, I was sure he was going to chew me out.

"V-san, Asano isn't feeling too good," Jūhachi said quickly. "I'm the one who told him not to work too much, and take it easy tonight." It seemed Jūhachi had gotten the same impression I did; he'd stuck up for me before V-san could even broach the subject.

But what V-san said instead surprised us both. "That's not why I called you over—this isn't about that. Remember that girl you brought here before...Miku-chan, was it? Could you bring her back again?"

"Huh...?" Well, this was completely unexpected.

"The club owner even said he'd pay her to perform. We've been getting a ton of requests from regulars, and from non-regulars too. They keep asking, 'When's that girl performing again?' They even come up to *me* and ask!"

I could understand why. Miku's singing had excited the entire, crowded dance floor. She'd looked so unbelievably happy that night; the club was the only place she could truly sing to her heart's content.

Miku hadn't seemed up to singing when Yoruko asked her to this evening, but maybe she would if she felt the atmosphere from the dance floor again. I knew in my bones that Miku loved music; she loved to sing.

"Gotcha," I said with a nod. "I'll let her know. When did you want her to come perform?"

"Whenever works best for her." Then V-san added, "But the sooner the better."

Jūhachi cheered. "All right! I'll get started on a set list for Miku-chan!"

Maybe Miku would act like herself again if she came here.

I knew she still had the old Miku inside of her, the Miku who so loved to sing. I suspected Professor Morisu had put her on a very short leash, but maybe, if she was surrounded by the music of the club, we could tear that leash off of her.

And maybe, if singing brought back her old self, the feelings she'd had for me back then would come back, too.

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[07/11 WED 10:15]

Miku was waiting for me just like always: with her head hanging down as she looked at the river.

I tried not to think about what had happened the day before and did my best to act normal when I called out, "Morning, Miku."

But then Miku replied, quite formally, "Good morning to you, Asano-san."

I began to tremble. I couldn't conceal the distress I felt at her distant, formal greeting.

Miku studied my face uncertainly. "Is something wrong?"

I completely lost my cool. "Miku...What the heck *happened?*" Without thinking, I grabbed her arms and pressed her further. "What happened?!" I shouted.

"I-I'm s-sorry...I'm sorry, Asano-san..." Miku's eyes couldn't seem to focus. "I'm sorry...I'm sorry..." Miku kept apologizing.

I'd frightened her. Since I'd abruptly bombarded her with questions, without any cues from our conversation, the only thing Miku could do was apologize. When I realized this, regret stabbed through my chest.

"...I need to apologize. I'm sorry." Miku still wouldn't look at me. I soldiered on. "But we're supposed to be cousins, remember? People will be suspicious if you don't speak informally to me, so... why did you say 'Good morning to you' just now?"

I knew this was probably an extreme overreaction to a few mere words, but, I had a terrifying feeling that all the time we'd spent together since we first met had been carelessly thrown away.

"I...I'll be careful," Miku replied less formally. She wore a pained smile, as if begging for my forgiveness.

After a short silence, I brought up the events from last night. "Miku, there's...something I wanted to talk to you about."

"What?" Although her speech was familiar again, her tone still felt awkward and stilted somehow.

"Do you remember coming to the club that I work at?" I asked.

"Sure. Jūhachi-san DJed, and I sang along with what he was playing. I had a lot of fun."

I felt kind of relieved to hear Miku say "fun." It seemed her sense of accomplishment wasn't so easily erased after all. "The customers at the club want to hear you sing again. You're very popular, Miku, even though you only sang once."

"...Really?"

"Yup. So I was thinking—maybe tomorrow, you could come sing at the club again?" I was *sure* she wanted to sing. That's why I wanted to arrange this opportunity for her. I was positive she hadn't forgotten the excitement of captivating a crowd.

"If that's what Asano-san wants me to do, then I will," Miku replied with a faint, reserved smile. Although she'd agreed to do it, her reaction was far from the exuberance she'd shown the last time I had asked.

I was sure that deep down, Miku liked to sing. All I could do was take my chances on that feeling.

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[07/12 THUR 20:45]

Jūhachi, Aika-san, Miku, and I stood waiting with V-san in the club later that night. It was almost time for Jūhachi and Miku to go on.

Jūhachi smiled cheerfully. "I'm counting on another awesome performance, Miku-chan! I've already prepped the best tracks to go with your vocals!"

"I missed your last performance," Aika-san said, "so I'm gonna sit back and enjoy this one. I hope Jūhachi doesn't hold you back, though. *Heh heh!*" Aika-san poking fun at Jūhachi helped lighten the mood.

"I think you have an amazing gift," V-san told Miku. "You've got a receptive audience here that loves your songs. But don't feel pressured by that, okay? All *you* gotta do sing your heart out." V-san's appraisal and advice to get the best performance out of Miku seemed to ease her excess nerves.

The current DJ put on a long final track to give himself time to switch out of the booth. It was Jūhachi's turn—which meant it was almost time for Miku to take the stage.

I gave Miku my own words of encouragement then. "Sing your songs, Miku. Everyone wants to hear you sing."

I was confident she'd respond well to our encouragements.

Jūhachi hit the repeat cue on the current track, and slid down the fader as he began playing the intro to the track he'd prepared for Miku. Miku stepped into position. It was just like last time. The intro ended, and the first lines of the song began to play.

"...I'm sorry." And with those two muttered words, Miku fled the DJ booth.

I ran to her and, without thinking, grabbed her arm to stop her from leaving. "Miku...what's wrong?"

"I'm sorry, I can't do it after all. I..." She trailed off.

Why had this happened? Hadn't she come because she wanted to sing? I had thought she'd be able to sing freely here—hadn't she come to do that?

"What can't you do? Why can't you do it?" I rattled off questions without taking time to sort them in my head.

"I can't..."

"What?" I asked, both because she'd spoken so softly, and because I couldn't believe what she'd said.

"I...I can't sing!" she suddenly burst out.

I'd never heard her speak so forcefully before, and my strength slowly left me.

Miku shook herself free from my weakened grip and turned her back on me. "Sorry." With that single word, Miku rushed off the dance floor.

I followed her unsteadily, but didn't have the energy to stop her from leaving the club.

Outside, it was pouring down rain, and the usual black car waited at the curb. Miku jumped in, and it peeled away from the club and drove off.

All I could do was get pelted by rain, and stare vacantly at Miku through the car's window as she drove out of sight.

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[07/18 WED 04:15]

The rainy season seemed later in coming than usual, and the days seemed endless, with rain off and on at all hours, while the sun stayed hidden behind the clouds.

It had been a week since Miku's strange behavior began.

And at the club last Thursday, Miku hadn't sung. I didn't know what to do. Nothing I could think really seemed like it would help.

The field test had continued in the interim between last Friday and today, however. Just like always, Miku waited every day for me on the bridge and greeted me with, "Good morning, Asano-san." We ate lunch together in the cafeteria and attended my afternoon classes. When it came time for me to go to the research lab, she would leave me with a "See you tomorrow" before going home. It was exactly the same routine as it had always been. Except now, I couldn't sense any of Miku's former joy and emotion.

We just *existed* with each other. We had bland, neutral conversations. The Miku who'd share any and all feelings she had with me seemed gone. Getting us back to how we'd been before seemed impossible.

I now understood exactly how much I'd enjoyed being with Miku before last week. Now, even seeing her face was difficult. Being with her was hard. No matter what type of conversation we had, everything stayed superficial.

I wondered what Professor Morisu would do if I said I was quitting the field test. He'd probably have no trouble reliving me of my duties. If he did, I'd be able to get through my days without

feeling so bitter. To be honest, I couldn't keep track of how often I'd thought about withdrawing from the field test over the past three days.

But that was the one thing I *couldn't* do, because the idea of never seeing her again was even worse.

I wanted to stay with Miku. Even if I couldn't fix things, I couldn't bear the thought of being separated from her.

I couldn't put her out of my mind. While I didn't want to yield to despair, there was nothing I could do. Rather, I didn't *want* to do anything. I didn't think I could endure it if I took action again and got my hopes crushed. I hoped that if I waited, maybe she'd return to how she used to be...

I didn't think that leaving it up to fate would somehow change thigns just because I wanted them to—but still, I clung to that hope. I began to hate myself for being so weak clinging was all I could do.

"Asano, you're useless," Jūhachi declared on our way home from work at the club.

It seemed reasonable for him to say that. I wasn't coming to work because I needed the money, nor because I didn't want to leave my co-workers high and dry by cancelling my shift. And it *certainly* wasn't because I liked the music-filled atmosphere there. Ultimately, I went to work out of sheer force of habit. But because of how I'd been feeling lately, I'd been slow at work, and made a lot of mistakes.

"You're right," I admitted. "I can't go on like this. It might be better if I quit." Jūhachi probably didn't enjoy working with me

while I was like this. I was sure the other people I worked with felt the same. If that was the case, it would surely cause less trouble for everyone if I quit.

"No, no, *that* ain't it! This ain't about the club! We'll help cover for you at the club any way we can. I'm talking about *Miku-chan.*"

"Miku? What about her?"

Jūhachi stopped in front of a vending machine without answering my question. "Let's stop here a sec," he said. He bought two cans of coffee and passed one to me. After taking a sip of his own, Jūhachi resumed our conversation. "...Anyway, I was in the cafeteria during lunch today, and I saw you and Miku together."

"Oh yeah...you were there, weren't you?"

Jūhachi didn't both trying to hide his frustration. "What the heck is up with your attitude?"

"My attitude?"

Jūhachi stood right in front of me and spoke while staring hard at my face. I didn't meet his eyes, but I didn't look away either—just stood there and felt his eyes boring into me. "Miku-chan seemed really worried about you, you know. The whole time I watched. She fussed over you a lot, kept asking you stuff like, 'Asano-san, are you not feeling well?' and 'Does your ramen not taste as good today?' But all you did was shake your head—you didn't even *answer* her! It was sad watching her get more and more insecure, while she tried to dance around your crappy mood. What the heck are you *thinking?*"

Everything had happened just as Jūhachi described it... But there was nothing I could do about the situation.

"Why won't you *say* anything? You've been acting really weird lately. Did something happen last Friday, after you brought Miku to the club with you, but she didn't sing?"

He was right. I was certain something had happened to her, something not just related to her android body. But...

"No, not really," I said. I couldn't explain it to him. If I tried, the fact that she was a man-made android would come up in the conversation. Professor Morisu's order to keep that a secret wasn't the *only* reason I couldn't tell Jūhachi. For one thing, I didn't think he'd believe me. But if he did, I'd've gotten him involved.

"...Looks like I misjudged you. You *do* like Miku-chan though, right? So stop making her look so sad!" Jūhachi's shout echoed across the Takadanobaba night.

I couldn't restrain myself any longer. I shouted back at him, "You don't know anything about the situation, so just shut up!"

Jūhachi got up in my face and grabbed me by the collar. "Oh, 'I don't know anything' about it, *huh?* That's just 'cause you won't *explain* anything!"

I answered Jūhachi's aggression by lashing out with all the anger and stress I'd pent up for the past week. "It'd be nice if I could just say whatever I wanted!" I yelled. "It'd be great if that's all it took to fix everything...but life's not like that, is it?!"

As soon as I said it, I felt Jūhachi's hard fist hit my cheek. The force of his punch knocked me onto my ass on the pavement.

"Get up!" he snarled. "If you're pissed at getting punched, then get up and punch back! And you call yourself a *man?!* The Asano I know is a nice guy who's always thinking about other people...

he's not weak like this!"

I didn't have the energy to stand, so I just sat there and hung my head.

"*Pfft,* pathetic. Just sit there and sulk until you feel better." With that parting shot, Jūhachi turned around and started walking off.

I spoke without realizing it. "What we feel for each other doesn't matter...it still won't change a damn thing."

For just a moment, Jūhachi paused...but then he kept on walking away.

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[07/18 WED 17:55]

The temperature and light quality inside the research lab were as constant as always; if you sat there without doing anything, you might think time had stopped.

"It's fine, you can take it easy," Aika-san reassured me.

"That's right," Machimura-san said. "Everyone has times when they just can't focus. That's all this is, Asano-kun. It's not something to worry about. You'll step up when the data gathering schedule gets tougher. Until then, let us take care of things."

Even *Machimura-san* was being sympathetic. It wasn't surprising: I'd been repeating the same mistakes during simple data gathering since last week, and yesterday I had made mistakes even a grade-schooler wouldn't make. They'd obviously decided I wouldn't be helping with experiments today. They were worried and trying to look after me.

The feeling that time in the lab had stopped was just an illusion, of course, and after a while of not doing anything, I was told I could go home, and left the research lab a little early.

I also had the day off from work. Because of the way things had ended last night between me and Jūhachi, however, I couldn't even drop by the club for a change of pace. All I could do was go back to my apartment and stay there, wrapped up in my thoughts.

The hands on my apartment wall clock—just within line of sight of my bed—kept moving forward. I fell asleep staring at them. When I awoke the next morning and left my apartment, Miku was waiting for me on the bridge. While we were together we had superficial, meaningless conversations, until it was time for her to go home and I saw her off...

Despite my earlier thoughts, my feelings were gradually leaning towards withdrawing from the field test. I wasn't sure I could keep myself going much longer, not with the way things had changed.

At that moment, my cell phone buzzed briefly. Looking at the screen, I saw I had a text from Yoruko.

"Onii, how has Miku-san been recently? She didn't look too upbeat the other day, so I'm a little worried. Girls deal with a lot of different things, so if Miku-san's in trouble, you need to be there to help her out. You're the only one who can protect Miku-san, Onii."

Although the text was mostly conjecture, it still cut me to the quick.

"You're the only one who can protect Miku-san, Onii."

I'd been thinking about this all wrong. *I wasn't sure I could*

keep up this charade anymore. That was me thinking only about *myself.* That was my weakness talking. If Miku was really important, I had to stay with her until the end, no matter the suffering I'd have to endure myself.

Since Miku's behavior had changed, I hadn't been taking good care of her. All I'd been doing instead was expecting things from her.

I wanted her to reciprocate my feelings. I wanted her to tell me why she hadn't been responding to my feelings the way I expected she would have responded before.

Right after Jūhachi punched me, he'd said I was "a nice guy who's always thinking about other people," but that wasn't true. I hadn't been thinking about how to care for Miku at all. I'd felt rejected and had been unable to bear it.

Miku hadn't looked any happier lately and I was sure part of that was my fault—but I didn't think I was the only reason.

Even if my feelings weren't reciprocated, I just had to deal with it. I had to get over it. For the past few days I'd been acting like a spoiled, sulking child, just like Jūhachi'd said—but I was put an end to that.

The Miku who'd so affected my feelings had changed. But I was going to return her to the Miku who was able to enjoy herself every single day.

Certain about my feelings, I'd dashed out of my room before I knew it. I didn't know where to go yet—all I knew was that I wanted to look for Miku. I had to see her and apologize for my recent selfish attitude.

As I rushed aimlessly from my apartment and into the rain, I saw the long silhouettes of two figures stretching across the narrow street.

"Yo, Asano. You headed somewhere? Let me join you," one of the figures said.

The other spoke next. "Let me come, too. I'd welcome a thrilling trip into the unknown."

For a few seconds the backlight blinded me, but when I looked closer, I realized the voices belonged to Jūhachi and Aika-san. They stood in the middle of the street with their arms crossed imposingly across their chests.

"Um...why?"

Aika-san said, "Because I saw your face in the research lab. Your cheek's not bruising, but it's still a little swollen. Since you're not the type to pick fights, I knew right away that Jūhachi must've hit you."

"So, I got a call from Aika-san," he said, picking up the story, "and she gave me a pretty harsh lecture. But not only that—I finally caught on to what you said last night, Asano."

"Um...what did I say, exactly?"

"You said something like, 'our feelings for each other don't matter, it won't change anything' right? When you said that, I thought you were just being obnoxiously sentimental, but when I thought about it more, I realized you aren't the kind of guy to turn to poetry as an escape. You're dealing with some kinda problem that you can't tell us about, right? You know, the way you always try to fix everything all by yourself is one of your bad points,

Asano." After declaring all of this in one breath, Jūhachi closed his eyes and grinned widely.

"Don't sound so proud of yourself," Aika-san chided. "You didn't even realize that you'd gone too far—*or* what Asano had really meant—until *I* made you tell me what happened."

"My bad, my bad. I thought it over again after I cooled off. About when Miku came to the club last Thursday. I wondered why someone like Miku, who loves music so much, wouldn't want to sing...Her passion and drive to sing wouldn't go away just because of a lover's spat with Asano. She loved singing *way* too much for that."

"That's why we met up and decided to come barge in on you. But then you ran outside instead. What unbelievably good timing."

"Jūhachi...Aika-san..." I fought back tears, though I wasn't sure whether they were from relief and appreciation, or because I felt like I'd been forgiven. It took me a moment to realize, but the rain had stopped. The red evening sun illuminated Jūhachi and Aika-san from behind, so they seemed almost enveloped in light.

Aika-san said, "Well then, standing and talking in the middle of the street is really awkward. Can we come up to your place?"

"It's pretty plain," I warned, "but if you're fine with that, sure."

I was going to tell them everything. That's what I decided.

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[07/18 WED 20:20]

Explaining the whole situation took a long time, but I never lost Jūhachi and Aika-san. They sat still and listened to everything I had to say.

When I was done, Jūhachi huffed. "That girl has one crazy story, all right..."

"I can't believe Miku's really an android," Aika-san marveled.

They were both just as amazed and shocked as I was when I told them about Professor Morisu explaining everything to me. The difference was, while an authority in the prosthetics research field had explained everything to me, *I* was the one explaining things to Jūhachi and Aika-san—and I was just a normal student. It would be strange if they believed everything that I'd said immediately, so I told them, "I don't expect you to believe all of this right away."

"*Nah,*" said Jūhachi, "it's not that I don't believe you. If you're saying it's the truth, then that's that."

Aika seemed to agree. "It's an absolutely *absurd* story, but you've got nothing to gain by lying to us. Besides, we already know you aren't the type of person to lie to us."

"...Thanks." I cursed the fact that this was all my inadequate vocabulary could come up with, but I meant it sincerely.

"In that case, what do you want to do, Asano?" Jūhachi asked.

"I want to help Miku." The words burst from my mouth with such immediacy, even *I* couldn't believe it. "Right now, I think Miku still remembers everything that's happened—it's just, she's purposely suppressing her feelings. I'm probably interpreting things the way I *want* them to be, but one thing's for sure: Miku

used to really care about me."

Jūhachi nodded. "If that were coming from some arrogant pick-up artist, things would be different...but since it's pure, innocent Asano, I think what he said is probably true."

"Asano isn't the type to be vain and show off when it comes to romance," Aika-san agreed.

"...Thanks. You know, I even called Professor Morisu once, and I kind of got the feeling he thought it wasn't a good idea for Miku to have romantic feelings. He probably thinks they'd interfere with the experiment."

"I see," said Aika-san. "In that case, what do you plan to do?"

"If we can figure out where they take Miku every day, we might be able to learn whether something happened between her and the professor." It wouldn't be solid evidence, but it was all I could come up with.

"So, what's the plan once we find all that out?" Jūhachi asked. "Get a hold of the researcher who's watching her and threaten 'em until they change Miku back to how she was?"

"Wait," Aika-san cut in, "something like that would *definitely* get back to Professor Morisu. What do you think would happen to Asano *then?*"

"Um..." I started. Aika-san and Jūhachi whirled back around to look at me. "We can worry about what's next later," I went on. "But for now, we should hurry up and find Miku. We can think up a solution while we're looking."

"*Ha ha ha!* 'Worry about it later,' *huh?*" Jūhachi grinned. "You can be pretty responsible, but a lot of your plans are pretty

touch-and-go. That side of you is great!"

"It *is* a pretty haphazard plan," Aika-san said. "Still, as long as our objective's clear, I think it'll work out."

If I thought about it, it surprised even *me* how irresponsible I was being. Despite this, Aika-san and Jūhachi didn't look angry at all; instead, they both looked delighted.

"Yeah, but of course, we should be careful. Now that Aika-san and I are in on the secret, it'd be *extra* bad if Asano got found out. Even Miku doesn't know what we're planning."

Jūhachi definitely had a point. "You're right," I said. "I don't want to cause trouble for you two, if possible. But, I still want to do *something*...Hopefully we can think of a good way to go about all this together." I was sure that there had to be *some* way. As I was thinking about it—

"*Heh heh,* this sounds like my time to shine," Aika-san said, chuckling confidently to herself.

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"First, we have to figure out where Miku-chan 'lives,' right? I'll find that out as soon as I can tomorrow evening."

Jūhachi grinned. "*Really?* Leave it to Aika! I dunno what you're gonna do, but I'm sure you'll figure it out for us."

"I'm gonna skip going to the research lab tomorrow, but Asano, you should go in like usual. Someone's more likely to get wind of our plan if we both skip."

"G-got it," I said, "But...what exactly do you plan on doing?"

Aika-san's eyes were full of confidence when she said, "I've told you before what my part-time job is, *right?*"

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[07/19 THUR 15:30]

Class was over for the day, and it was time to see Miku off. "Thank you very much for today, Asano-san. I look forward to seeing you again tomorrow," Miku said with a subdued smile. With those courteous parting words, she headed towards the car.

The way she spoke to me had already changed so much. Her smile was always exactly the same, like it was stuck to her face—nothing like the many expressions she'd displayed before.

I watched as the back door closed behind Miku, and the car quietly drove out of sight.

Immediately after, a road bike zoomed past me with the speed of a gale-force wind.

Without slowing, Aika-san glanced fleetingly back at me before eying the road and turning in the direction Miku's car had taken.

After seeing that she was on her way, I headed to the research lab. All my thoughts were on Miku, however--I lacked the concentration I'd need to perform even the simplest of tasks. Still worse, Aika-san, my data gathering partner who I always worked with as a team, wasn't going to be there today. Nevertheless, I went to the research lab, thinking, *This must be how a criminal trying to create an alibi feels.*

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[07/20 FRI 3:55]

As usual, work at the club didn't go particularly smoothly, but this time it wasn't because I felt so depressed that I had no energy. Instead, it was because I couldn't concentrate; I was too consumed with anticipation.

I gazed out over the bar at the DJ booth, and *that* day sprang to mind: the day Miku stood in the booth next to Jūhachi and sang. I thought of her voice, which had stolen all of our hearts.

Right now, I had friends who were lending me their strength and working towards my goal of getting that back. Because of that, my entire outlook had changed.

"Hey there, bartender."

I turned to face the voice and found Aika-san standing there.

Jūhachi, who'd finished his DJ set and was standing next to me, replied to Aika-san first. "Oh, it's you, Aika! How'd it go?"

"Well, first off, I'm in the mood for a Moscow Mule--but I'll go with a Coke tonight since I have some important news to tell you after your shift."

My eyes widened. "That means..."

"Yup. I figured out where Miku's 'house' is."

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[07/20 FRI 4:30]

When the club closed, the three of us moved to a family restaurant. Aika-san was the first one to speak. "Her 'house' is in the high-rise district of Nishi-Shinjuku. They're renting out the entire

twenty-fifth floor of the second Tomosumi Tower."

"This is *huge*, Aika. You did a great job tailing them!" said Jūhachi, looking sincerely impressed.

"I work part time as a bike courier, so it was really no big deal," Aika-san said casually.

"That's that job where you ride your bike to a client and pick up some documents or whatever, and then rush to the delivery address as fast as possible, right?"

"Exactly. That's why I know all the roads around here down to the narrow side streets. Besides, I figured a bike could definitely keep up with a car during rush hour traffic."

I frowned. "But did they figure out you were tailing them?" The same bicycle continually showing up in the rear-view mirror would've definitely aroused suspicion, after all.

But Aika-san's response explained things with perfect clarity. "I kept in contact with my co-workers—they scouted out ahead and waited for me. After that, I chose the best moment to slip onto some back street in order to switch places with them. I changed my helmet and jersey, too. We did that routine about three times, so I doubt they figured us out."

"Wow, you did all that?" Jūhachi marveled. "More importantly, you changed clothes on the side of the road? Oh, *man*—I wish I'd been there to see that!"

"Idiot. I had twenty to thirty seconds at most, so I just wore three layers and took one off each time. It was hot and stuffy and hard to move before I took off the first layer though, so things were a little difficult, at first."

Aika-san probably had this plan hammered out pretty early on. It was exactly what I'd expect of someone like her. "Thank you, Aika-san," I said.

"What do you mean, Asano? The *real* work starts now."

"Oh, yeah," said Jūhachi. "She's got a point. We got the place, but can we get in?"

"I figured out what floor they're on by looking at the directory in the lobby. After that, I staked out the building."

"S-staked out?!" I couldn't believe that she'd gone that far for me...

"Yeah. First, the two men that rode in the car came down from the twenty-fifth floor. That was at 8:42. Next, a very interesting person took the elevator up to Miku's 'house' on that floor."

From the way she said 'a very interesting person,' I knew who she was talking about. "It was Morisu-sensei, wasn't it?" I asked.

"Yup. Morisu-sensei entered at 9:38 PM and came down at 10:16 PM. Then about two hours later, at 12:05 AM, three men went from Miku's floor down to the first floor. I watched until 3:30 AM, but no one else came or went from her floor."

Aika-san's investigation results were so minute and detailed, Jūhachi and I were at a loss for words as we sat there and listened.

"...What's wrong?" she asked after our silence had gone on too long. "You guys haven't said anything, and you look as surprised as a pigeon that got shot with a peashooter."

"Sorry," I said, "it's just—checking everything so perfectly like that, with a timeline of everyone's movements...I'm just overwhelmed..."

"That's insane, Aika!" Jūhachi crowed. "You could totally be a legendary detective!"

Aika-san seemed unimpressed. "Cut it out. I have *no* interest in becoming a detective. Besides, isn't data something you're supposed to collect as much of as possible, with as much precision as possible, so you can verify your hypothesis? The fact that a polytech student and a polytech dropout would so overvalue results like these is kind of depressing."

While Aika-san had a very good point, what I'd been admiring wasn't just the abundance and precision of her data, but her efforts to get them. Lots of people can sketch out a great plan. Far fewer people, however, can take a great plan and make it reality.

If I had Aika-san's drive and ability to get things done, I might've been able to do something for Miku before things got this complicated.

Aika-san snapped me out of my thoughts. "Now isn't the time to be mysterious and gloomy, Asano-kun. Like I said, the *real* problems start from here on out."

"She's right, Asano," Jūhachi agreed. "Aika figured out where Miku's 'house' is, but we'll have no idea what they're doing to Miku unless we get in there. Unfortunately, these kinds of places normally—"

"Yup. Their security will be a problem. Luckily enough, thanks to one of the first floor tenants being a convenience store, and the top floor being a bar that's open all night, anyone can come and go from the entryway—*and* ride the elevator—twenty-four hours a day."

"Did you get on the elevator, Aika?"

"Yeah, I did. I didn't go to the twenty-fifth floor, but as a test, I went to the twenty-fourth and twenty-third floors. Their security system is the kind where you tap a chip card at the room entrance to get in. I think the twenty-fifth floor probably has the same system."

"It's a common type of security but it's hard to crack," Jūhachi said. "Forging chip cards is pretty difficult."

Despite Aika-san having done so much for us, we'd hit a dead end...

No. I *couldn't* let it all end here. I was thinking of doing something reckless and absurd. I'd started this already not knowing if we'd be able to do anything. But if we didn't do *something,* I felt like I wouldn't be able to go on at all, not even one more step.

"...At any rate, let's go," I told them. "We know where it is now, and if that's how things stand, then we'll just have to take our chances. Even if we have to go and kick down the door, we'll get in, and we'll see what they're doing to Miku."

Unexpectedly, Jūhachi was the one who said, "Hold up! Hold up, Asano. It's rare for you to get fired up and—while I don't mean to rain on your parade—I think you should leave this to me."

".....?" Jūhachi, the reckless one, was discouraging my plan? "If it's impossible to duplicate one of their chip cards, how else are we supposed to get in?" I asked.

Jūhachi's confident grin was so wide his eyes shut. "I said forging the cards is *pretty* difficult—I never said it was *impossible.*" He

jumped abruptly up from his chair. "We gotta strike while the iron's hot! Let's get this done before morning."

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[07/20 FRI 4:55]

Jūhachi's apartment was always magnificently messy whenever I visited, but he still knew exactly where things were. He explained it like this: "I almost never have people over, so there's no point in cleaning up. Even if I *did* have time to clean, I'd spend it practicing DJing instead."

Aika-san was frowning as she surveyed the place. "You know... I'm surprised you can even sleep in a room this cluttered."

"If you're tired enough, you can sleep anywhere," Jūhachi said amiably. *Then* he saw where she was standing. "Hey, Aika, be careful! Don't step on the stuff on the floor! Right in front of your right foot is a brand new record I bought the day before yesterday. And just behind your left foot is a really rare record that took me *ages* to find. Don't you *dare* step on them!"

"You can tell me not to step on things all you want, but there's not exactly any open floor space for me to use instead!"

Rather than answering her, Jūhachi said, "All right, then...let's get to it."

Jammed snugly on the narrow, rectangular desk at which Jūhachi sat, were a turntable and mixer, an LCD monitor, and a CDJ set. Jūhachi bent at an uncomfortable-looking angle and pushed the power on the computer under his desk. It finished

starting up after just a few seconds.

"We basically just gotta open the lock right?" he said. "I'll finish this up lightning fast." The command line appeared on the monitor. Jūhachi quietly placed his hands over his keyboard and took a deep breath. Then he started typing at a terrifying speed.

"What exactly are you doing?" I asked him.

"First off, I'm going to take a peek inside the building's security system...okay, so the communications channel between the building and the security firm they contracted is...*here.*"

The command line was scrolling quickly upwards.

"IDs are stored on the security company's server. This looks just like I expected it to. So, obviously, the IDs are encrypted. This is where I *really* get to show off."

"Okay," I said, "but Jūhachi...when the heck did you manage to hack into both the security firm's server *and* the building's?"

"Don't underestimate me, man. Anyway, this part's easy. These are just passwords people type in, so you can find out how many characters they are. However, the encryption on the ID Cards isn't quite that simple. The passwords that machines use to connect with each other gotta be strong, so this is a whole 'nother level of difficulty."

While Aika-san couldn't move due to the detritus all over the floor, she could still ask, "So what you're saying is there's still a way to get in? Because you're..."

"Of course there is. I'm going to use my trump card." Jūhachi's hands never stopped typing while he spoke. "Before I dropped out, I left a backdoor in the Technical Computing server. If you

access *that,* there're five *other* servers—all connected for collaborative research—which you can access simultaneously. This is because academic research servers rely on each other. Once you do that, the rest is a snap."

It was all so unbelievable, but Jūhachi spoke without hesitation. "It's impressive you found that backdoor," I told him. "I mean, it's been almost a year since you quit school."

"Oh, it's fine. I installed my own chip."

"What?!" Jūhachi's 'trump card' had *completely* surpassed everything I'd imagined.

"I secretly replaced the communications device chip with an original of my own. The parts inside the server get swapped out over time to enhance performance, but the communications device that speaks with the outside doesn't ever need replacing—unless it goes and breaks down, or something. So mine's probably still there...All right, I'm *in.*"

I'd heard of that method before, but couldn't believe that *Jūhachi* had done it.

Aika-san huffed. "It really is a waste, Jūhachi. Right up until you left, didn't everybody—students *and* professors—say you were a data processing genius? Why would you drop out?"

"I'm not a genius, just a perfectionist. When I was in high school I was super into this stuff, so I hacked into the backend of a lot of sites. It was fun. So it's not that I don't like all this—that's why I went to a school known for its computer science department, after all. It's just that I think spinning records at the club is ten thousand times more exciting! That nervous,

edge-of-your-seat feeling just never stops!" While he answered Aika-san, Jūhachi rustled around under his desk and pulled out a piece of equipment. "All right, wait's over. The decryption of the logs between Miku's room and the security company is finished. Once I write over a chip card with the ID I just grabbed, it'll be good to go."

"Do the specs match up?"

"They do. This security company keeps about ten blank cards on hand, and this card writer here is the same kind they use."

"Hold on a second," I said. "How the heck do you have one of *those?*"

"You'd think it'd be obvious, but there are companies that make and supply security companies with their equipment and cards. And not all of the employees at those companies are necessarily straight-laced and responsible. So I guess you could say I got my hands on this through a little...give-and-take."

"....." I decided not to ask Jūhachi exactly what he had "given" to that bad employee—I was scared to find out.

"There we go, the card's finished. Unfortunately, I went far enough in that there's gonna be traces left on the school's servers—so I don't think I'll be able to use this trick again. But I'm glad I at least got to use it once." Jūhachi passed me the spoofed card.

I gripped it, and the weight of it in my palm felt somehow heavier than the card actually was.

Aika-san voiced her admiration. "A little under an hour since you started...that takes tremendous skill. You can't brute force a decryption that fast..."

Jūhachi puffed out his chest. "Well that's just my genius bursting forth. Bursting forth into analytical algorithms."

"Honestly. I don't like to be so persistent, but I can't keep myself from saying it again. It really is *such* a waste. Couldn't you just do your DJing on the side? Seriously—why did you have to drop out?"

Aika-san had a completely valid point. Precisely because it was a sound argument, however, this would normally be when whoever she was talking to started getting upset.

Jūhachi, however, was smiling and looked completely happy. "But that's just it! You've put it perfectly, Aika! 'Drop' means you've been born, like an album, right? And 'out' means that you've rushed off into the wide world. If you combine those, don't they make a fantastic phrase?"

Jūhachi's reply used an extremely liberal interpretation of both words, but when Aika-san heard it, she almost seemed taken aback by it, and giggled a little.

"All right then, Asano, I've finished all the preparations."

"Yeah, okay," I said. "Thanks."

The three of us left Jūhachi's apartment and made our way towards Nishi-Shinjuku. We were going to find out *exactly* what was happening to Miku.

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[07/20 FRI 6:25]

The building Aika-san had found rose up and blocked off the bright morning sky.

"The three people that left at 12:05 AM were most likely the last," she said, "so I don't think there's anyone up in the room right now."

"What makes you say that?" I asked.

"The three people who came down didn't call a taxi or get in their own cars. Instead, they started walking towards the station. Given the time, they'd probably finished up their work so they could catch the last train."

"Sounds about right," said Jūhachi. "When I was spoofing the cards, I checked how many there were, and it said six."

Six cards. Between Professor Morisu, the two men in the car, and the three people that came down from the room, the numbers added up.

We looked straight ahead as we walked from the entrance to the elevators, trying to act as nonchalant as possible while avoiding gazing directly at the security cameras installed all around. I wiped my sweaty palms on the bottom of my shirt when we got onto the elevator. It felt like we rose fast; the change in pressure made my ears pop. The elevator display stopped at floor twenty-five, and the doors opened. On the landing in front of us stood a door clearly installed with a security system.

I paused. "...So why did the two of you come with me?" Aika-san, belonging as she did to the same research lab as me, was understandable—but I'd even made Jūhachi go out on a limb for me. If we were discovered at the scene, I had no idea what would happen to the two of them. I didn't even know what would happen to *me* if Professor Morisu found I'd snuck in here—and I thought it extremely likely that he would.

Aika-san said, "Well, we've already come this far, and there still might be something that I can help with. I'd also *really* like it if I didn't have to keep watching you act all dreary and depressed."

"Sorry. I-I feel really bad about that. I mean, we work facing each other in the research lab."

"Exactly! And I'm always the one who has to come and save your butt. Even at the club!"

"Hold up a second," Jūhachi said, "usually *I'm* the one covering for Asano's mistakes. The past couple of days have just been a fluke."

It was plain to me now that the both of them were worried about me.

"Well, Asano," said Jūhachi, "are you gonna open the door, or what? Why the heck else do ya think I made this chip card?"

Right now it was 6:30 AM. I had no idea when the people that went home last night would show up for their shift. I knew that we had to get in as soon as possible and confirm Miku's current condition. But...

"After coming this far, are you seriously thinking that you don't want us getting further involved?" Jūhachi and Aika-san both said at the same time.

"Yeah, I am. You've done so much to help me already, and I don't want to cause trouble for you by dragging you even deeper into this convoluted mess. I couldn't be responsible for that." My words probably came off as a contradictory mix of indifference and self-righteousness. But that was the only way I could think of to say it.

"What are you even saying?" Aika-san scoffed. "The main reason I'm here is because this seemed interesting."

Jūhachi added, "Don't take me so lightly, Asano. For me, as long as my life's not in danger, every misadventure's an *event,* or a quest! *Wooboo!*"

"You guys..." I couldn't finish the thought; my words would have sounded contrived. They had just reaffirmed for me that these two were the best, most irreplaceable companions I could ask for. "...Thanks. I'm going to open the door."

I pressed Jūhachi's spoofed card against the scanner.

I heard the short groan of a motor, followed by the rattle of a lock being released.

We opened the door and entered the dim room. Most of the large space was empty, but in the middle clustered a number of cabinets that held what looked like medical equipment, and desks set up with computers. And in the center of all of this—

There stood what looked like a surgeon's table. On it lay Miku, with her eyes closed.

I rushed over as if propelled, and called out to her. "Miku... Miku!" But she didn't respond. "Miku, it's me, Asano. If you can hear me, open your eyes." I put my hand on her shoulder and shook gently, but her eyelids still didn't move. Although I was disappointed, I calmed down just enough to notice the strange setup around me. Countless cables extended from Miku, connecting her body to the equipment surrounding her. She looked like a patient in an intensive care unit on a television show. It was painful to see her like this.

"Calm down, Asano! It's probably best if you don't jostle her around in a panic." As he said this, Jūhachi quickly sat down in front of one of the computers and began typing rapidly. "First lemme search through the logs over here."

With painful reluctance, I stepped away from Miku and moved instead to peer over Jūhachi's shoulder.

"So the computers are always on, huh," he was saying. "This is... It looks like it's monitoring Miku's condition in real time."

"What about the records, Jūhachi?" Aika-san said over his opposite shoulder. "Without seeing the logs, we won't be able to figure out what was done to cause Miku's change in behavior."

Both of them had far better presence of mind than I did.

"I'm looking now. '0619 1200'...That must mean noon on June nineteenth. 'Start-up Check —normal. EM value, zero. Error rate: 0.000. Commence field test.' Hey Asano, do you remember anything about the nineteenth of June?"

I tried to remember. "June nineteenth... That was the day I first met Miku."

"*Hmm?*" he said. "This utility...with this, you can graph out the amount of variance per day." Jūhachi clicked on a button with a symbol that looked like a line graph, and a graph popped up on the screen. "The dates... This graph goes from June nineteenth to July nineteenth."

Multiple color-coded lines ran across the graph area.

"This number...it suddenly increases from June twenty-eighth to June thirtieth, then on July first, there's an even *more* drastic increase. Then, it levels off on the second, then rises again on the

third—is this the 'error rate?' Wait no, what's going on with this rate of variance? On the third, it rose all the way to 0.988, then fell all the way back down to 0.000 on the fourth, then back to 0.902 on the fifth, .304 on the sixth...and from then up 'til yesterday, it maintained a rate between 0.2 and 0.5."

I intently stared at the graph. The times where the violent fluctuations in error rates occurred perfectly coincided with the times when I began feeling like Miku had changed, had begun acting different.

"What about the variance in the other numbers?" Jūhachi continued. "'Temp' stays mostly the same—her body temperature, I'm guessing. What about this line...this one rises every six days and then resets back to zero on the Monday of every week. Think it's the degradation index for the polymeric liquid Asano told us about?"

"Yeah, I think that's absolutely what it is," Aika-san agreed. "It sounds like if that isn't replaced, Miku will stop being able to move."

"Uh huh. Okay, what's this red line? EM Value...It's been rising in a clean, proportionally straight line from zero on June nineteenth all the way up to ninety-eight. Then suddenly, on the third of July, it fell back down to three, then thirty-five on the fifth, and from then until now, it's been on a steady decline. Looks like it was at nine as of yesterday."

I didn't know the meaning of the values Jūhachi kept reading off. One thing was certain though: when the values abruptly changed, Miku changed, too.

"I'm real curious about the giant rate of variance between the third and fifth of July. I bet we'll find out more in the detail logs for that period." Jūhachi moved the mouse as he muttered this, and the display on the monitor switched to the text notes of the detail logs. "All right, for the third of July...'Error rate: 0.998. Percentage left until threshold: 0.002. Emergency shutdown.' July fourth: 'Restart. Error rate: 0.642. Recovery until within test sustainability range. As protective measure, EM value upper limit controlled.' So when the errors increased, they restarted her, huh."

Aika said, "If that's the case, why did the errors increase again on July fifth? Not only that— they rise even more sharply than before."

"Slow down, I'm opening those details now. 'July fifth. Frequent unexpected errors. Cause unknown. Error rate: 0.912. Percentage left until test sustainability threshold: 0.098. Emergency shutdown. Library installation to suppress EM values. Success. Error rate drop to 0.002. Recovery until within test sustainability range.'...Does anything come to mind, Asano?"

I frowned. "I don't know...I don't know, but the time period coincides with when Miku's behavior changed." That's right. There was that abnormal event. Then, after that event, Miku and I stopped meshing with each other. The gulf between my unrequited feelings and her cooling emotions had seemed to grow steadily wider each day after that.

"Library...what's *that* mean? There has to be a description in another file..." After a few moments where his typing was the only sound echoing through the room, Jūhachi's hands stilled. "Is this

it? 'Thought Library: Number one, normal. Number two, dark. Number three, solid. Number four, light. Number five, sweet. Number six, vivid. Number seven, soft.'..."

Seven thought libraries—I wondered if these were what made up Miku's "heart" and emotions.

"For the operation history...there's no recent records remaining for libraries one through five. I'm sure with some digging they'd turn up. Number six has been adjusted six times in the past month. Number seven was adjusted once."

"In that case..." mused Aika-san, sitting down to type at a neighboring computer, "the cause of the errors must be in number six..."

"Hold up a sec...," Jūhachi said. "'July fifth: library number six out of control. Library deleted.' This, maybe?"

"Library...deleted..." I unconsciously repeated, and sunk deep into thought.

"So the reason Miku suddenly became docile and well-behaved is because one part of her emotions—her 'thought library'—was deleted?" Aika-san said, although she never stopped typing.

Jūhachi seemed to agree. "Yeah, I think that's it. We don't know any of the details, but you can make a general guess. They're replicating the diversity of human emotion inside these seven thought libraries. These libraries are the source of Miku's emotions. But if it seemed like number six was causing all these errors, wouldn't you try taking that library out too, just for the time being?"

I couldn't believe Professor Morisu had done that to Miku, but Jūhachi's supposition seemed accurate. If that was indeed

how it had all played out, it explained everything that had happened up to now.

But I couldn't just accept it.

At the professor's whim, a whole section of Miku's emotions had been taken away.

I couldn't allow that.

"...Jūhachi," I said, "can you reinstall library number six?" I had something more important to do than let myself burn with rage at the professor right now. I had to return Miku to her original state. If we restored library number six, wouldn't Miku return to how she'd been before? It seemed a natural conclusion.

Jūhachi said, still typing, "I was thinking the same thing but... I can't find it. The thought library, I mean, not just number six. I can't find *any* of them." He frowned at the monitor as his fingers flew. "What type of file name it would have? What hidden folder would they put it in? I *should* be able to find it...but for some damn reason it won't show up... *Hm?*" His appearance changed from irritation to realization.

"Did you find it?" I found myself bending closer to the monitor. There was a text file open on the screen.

"'Hatsune Miku Thought Library Summary'..." read Jūhachi. "'The libraries are implemented as *hardware structures, not as software.*' So, the libraries are read-only memory? 'Reproduction of libraries on hardware is not possible. The structure is lost when libraries are uninstalled, so reutilization is not possible.' Huh? I've never heard of a method like this before. But if what's written here is true, that means..."

I finished the thought: "...since library number six was deleted, it doesn't exist *anywhere* anymore..."

We couldn't return something that was gone for good. Was this a dead end?

At that moment, a small shout from Aika-san interrupted our brooding silence. "You guys, come look at this!"

We rushed over to Aika-san's computer. It seemed while Jūhachi and I were busy looking through the detailed logs, Aika-san had done her own investigating.

"W-what's this...?" I stuttered. "'[DELETED] Thought Library Number Six. Full name: Somejima Otoha. Gender: Female. Age when personality was acquired: sixteen years and three months. Address: Yamanashi Prefecture, Kōfū. ○○'...?" I had no idea what to make of this. Address? Full name?

Aika-san added, "Her height, weight, blood type, academic achievement test results from the past eight years, family registry—even her DNA profile—are all in this subfolder."

It was an exhaustive collection of personal data.

"This girl...this changes things," Jūhachi muttered bitterly.

The normally calm and collected Aika-san seemed unusually perplexed. "What do you think? Do you think they developed this detailed backstory to create Miku's artificial intelligence? But if that were the case..."

"I don't think that's it," said Jūhachi. "This is probably..."

When Jūhachi seemed hesitant to continue, I finished for him: "A real person. Somejima Otoha's probably a real girl."

That was it. What this data showed was that Miku's emotions,

speech, and behavior weren't the product of a genuine artificial intelligence doing genuine computation, but came instead from a real person used as the model for Miku's "personality."

What Professor Morisu had told me was a lie.

Maybe I'd suppressed—and kept on suppressing—what I'd suspected from the start.

Objectively speaking, it had all seemed a bit *too* extraordinary that a real computer was capable of such human behavior. "So basically," I said, voicing my conclusion, "*Miku isn't a genuine artificial intelligence.* She was constructed with an actual person's personality as a base to force developmental growth."

"Aika, move," snapped Jūhachi.

"Hm? What the—?!"

Jūhachi yanked Aika-san's chair out without waiting for her to stand. The moment they'd traded places, he started moving the mouse with ferocious speed.

"What the heck was all *that* about?" Aika-san complained.

"The original personality was a *human's,* right? Think about it—that's entering into some pretty terrifying, unethical territory! Until someone gets here, I'm gonna find out as much as I can. They must've used other people as models for the other libraries. And if they're secretly stealing people's personalities, then...well, I bet we can use that to bargain with the professor."

Jūhachi was right. Miku was an artificial intelligence that, through the combined personalities of multiple existing people, was able to give responses almost exactly like a human would, and whose body couldn't be seen as anything less than a living,

breathing, human being's.

Created according to its creator's whims, it could be controlled, unlike the people it was modeled after. It might be used for criminal activity. There were a number of other ways to use such an android. The biggest problem with using an artificial intelligence was that it wasn't a simple robot, but one with emotions and a personality. Miku was proof of that. Could an android that had the same personality as a human still be treated however its owner wanted to treat it? Although it was artificial, wasn't that essentially slavery? Supposing androids were treated like slaves—wasn't it possible that the person they were modeled after would be squashed underfoot along with their personality?

"Dammit, this is taking longer than I thought..." Jūhachi was wholly focused on operating the computer.

I alone heard the subtle rustling of clothes behind him. My eyes followed the sound, and I saw Miku sitting up and looking at us. "Mi-Miku!"

When I cried out, Jūhachi and Aika-san's gazes also flew to Miku.

"Whoa! Were we too noisy? Did we wake you?" I asked her.

Miku began to speak quietly. "Even when my body is asleep, I can still think, and hear sound."

Her voice was dispassionate, expressionless.

Jūhachi paused. "...Looking at the records, Miku-chan's only been shut down a handful of times. So basically, up until now, you've been in a state similar to a computer's 'sleep' function."

Miku nodded wordlessly.

"Miku..." I questioned her as if I was praying. "What's happening to you right now? How much do you know about yourself? I want to know more about you. I have to know."

"...I don't know exactly how much I know about myself. Compared to what I knew until yesterday, however, I've come to understand more about what I am. Know this: when you three *looked at my memories,* it was the first time I'd seen someone do it in that way, and I think that enabled me to learn more about myself."

Jūhachi mused, "When I accessed the data outside the regular procedures, a circular referential logic circuit probably developed..."

"Yes, probably..." Miku paused a moment. "Then I opened my eyes and... *Oh*..." It seemed like she'd planned to say something and stopped. After a short silence, Miku said, "Jūhachi-san's unauthorized access has been detected. Security personnel will arrive in approximately six minutes. Please leave the premises."

"What?!"

"It seems like Miku-chan still being connected to these computers means she could detect that we've been detected," Aika-san marveled.

"This ain't the time to be admiring anything, Aika," Jūhachi cried, "we've only got six more minutes!"

"If we leave," I said, "then coming back...it'll be impossible, right? We can't use the same method as we did this time to get in again. If we leave here, we can't come back. So all we can do *now* is decide on what to do with the time we have left."

"We haven't run into any trouble so far, so I think if we hurry up and get out now, they probably won't even know it was us," Jūhachi said. "But it doesn't seem right for us to just leave her like this...What should we do, Asano?"

We were out of time. And it was up to me to decide what to do.

I asked myself, *What do you* want *to do? What are you hoping for?*

I decided.

"...Miku, I'm kidnapping you—let's go." The pause before I spoke wasn't born of hesitation, but confirmation. I felt like my feelings had solidified by the time we'd arrived here, and now I couldn't hold back the desire welling up: I wanted to return Miku to the happy, cheerful Miku she'd been before. And I wanted to be together—with that happy, cheerful Miku—forever.

"I want to go with you, too," she responded quietly but immediately, her tone leaving no room for doubt. Even though these circumstances had pushed our backs up against a wall, my heart filled with happiness.

"Asano-san, is 'vivid' going to be necessary?"

"Oh...Yes." I felt momentarily flustered, being asked by the person we'd just been talking about. "If we have 'vivid,' we'll be able to get you back to normal."

"Understood. If I am able to meet the model for number six, Somejima Otoha, I think I would probably be able to reconstruct and reinstall the library myself." Miku spoke confidently; she'd told us she'd come to understand herself, after all. "I want to recover the heart and emotion that I've lost."

All I could do was stake everything on Miku's words.

"The current time is—six fifty in the morning...The security personnel will be in this room in four minutes. Asano-san, Jūhachi-san, Aika-san, let us leave quickly."

I had a plan. "We'll search for the base model, Somejima Otoha. We know there's a way to make a thought library based on a real person, so if we just make the same one as before..."

"Asano, you're aware of how selfish that sounded, right?" Aika-san checked.

"Yeah. But, I'll do anything I have to." If I didn't get that stranger's personality, then I couldn't get Miku back to normal. Even *I* didn't know if this was the best course of action. But...I couldn't give up. It was impossible for me to give up.

"All right then," Jūhachi said. "If you're serious about this, and you've decided you really just wanna make Miku happy, then I'm helping!"

"Unwavering resolve, huh?" Aika-san echoed. "Then I'll lend a hand, too, with everything in me."

The two of them had sympathized with my determination, even though it seemed reckless. "...Thanks," I told them both.

The moment I finished talking, Jūhachi and Aika-san started sweeping around the room like a whirlwind.

"Asserting yourself isn't always such a bad thing!" Jūhachi called over. "Especially for you, Asano, and for guys like you. Hey, Aika! Jot down that address, A-S-A-P!"

"I already took a picture with my phone!" she called back. "What's next?!"

"Shut down that computer! Open up the side panel and take out all the hard drives! And take 'em with you!"

"Why?! That's gonna take time!"

"I'm gonna keep digging. Number six is gone, but if I can scan the records thoroughly, I might be able to construct new hardware based on that. Besides, once I go scanning all this data, we'll need some way of understanding how to install it, right?"

"Got it! Grab me a screwdriver!"

"Jūhachi, Aika-san, I'll let you handle the computers!" I said. "I'm gonna search for a way out!"

When I jogged past them, Jūhachi had already removed a few internal hard drives, and was carrying them in both hands as he helped Aika-san shut down the computers.

I called out when I found something. "There's an emergency exit over here! Let's use this so we don't risk running into security!"

"We finished taking out the hard drives!"

We left the room through the emergency exit and used the stairs to get out of the building. From there, we ran all out until we reached Shinjuku Central Park. I checked behind us—no sign of anyone. For the time being, it looked like we'd given our pursuers the slip.

"Asano, you take Miku and head for the station," Jūhachi decided. "It's about time for the commuters' morning rush to get heavy. If you can slip into the crowd, even if the security personnel catch up to you, they shouldn't be able to do anything violent."

"I'm gonna head back to my room and get a change of clothes for Miku," said Aika-san. "If she stays in the same outfit, she's

more likely to be spotted."

"Sounds good," I said. "In that case, we'll go on ahead to the turnstiles at the east entrance and wait...*huh?*" Inside my pocket, my phone had started to vibrate.

I swiped and looked at the screen: Professor Morisu was calling.

The two of them peeked at my phone and immediately exclaimed, "If he's calling you now, that means we've been found out for sure!"

"Asano, do *not* pick up!"

It would be smarter not to pick up. Nevertheless, I had something I wanted to ask him. "No, I'm picking up." I answered the phone with bated breath.

"That was an extremely bold move," said the professor. "I didn't think you had it in you."

That's my line, I thought. "Morisu-sensei, what are you playing at? Why did you hide the fact that you used real people as your model for Miku?!"

"It wasn't necessary information to give you for your continuation with the field test. No, rather, it's plain from your current behavior that this information has been *detrimental*."

"In that case, why did you modify Miku without telling me, the tester?"

"I believe I've said this before, but *I explained everything to you that I was able to explain.* There was nothing else I needed to say."

"I can't accept that! Are you saying it's okay to manipulate a person's emotions just because you have the technology to do it?!"

"...And I'd made sure you were assigned to my research laboratory because your profile matched that of a tester. The fact that you have this kind of sentimentality means that, somehow or another, our investigation wasn't enough. As of now, I'm releasing you from your field testing duties. I will be sending people out shortly to get you. I hope you and Hatsune Miku will stay put and wait for them to arrive."

I was about to tell him I no longer had to follow his instructions, but Jūhachi snatched my cell phone and immediately turned it off, then opened up the back and took out the battery. "For now," he said, "I think it's best to assume he knew we were here because he tracked your GPS. If I was one of the people on his team, the first thing I'd do is hack the cell phone carriers to track us."

"So we need to move fast." Aika-san shut off her cell phone and took the battery out too. "In that case, let's meet up again where we just talked about." She turned and rushed off.

"Asano, hurry to the station! And be careful about who sees you! I gotta prep some stuff to give you, too, but then I'll head to the station, as well!" Jūhachi ran off.

Jogging together, Miku and I left the park behind us.

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[07/20 FRI 7:40]

The Shinjuku underground was jam-packed with commuters.

Jūhachi saw us at the edge of the walkway and shoved his way through the crowd to get close. "Sorry for keepin' ya, Asano!

Take this." He handed me an unfamiliar cell phone. "I've got *yours*," he said. "I'll grab a taxi, put the battery back in, then jam it under the seat. If we're lucky, that'll keep 'em busy for a while and buy us some time."

Professor Morisu was probably using my cell phone's positional information to track me down, so Jūhachi had prepared an untraceable cell phone for me so we could keep in contact.

Aika-san arrived after Jūhachi and pushed a paper bag at me. "This is a change of clothes for Miku-chan. If she wears something else, I think she'll be a little harder to spot."

"The last thing...is this," I said while we ran down the emergency exit stairs, taking off Miku's hair ribbons. We left them where they fell. The ribbons were wireless communicators, according to the operating manual Jūhachi had read, so it was safer for us to remove them and leave her hair down.

"Much better," Aika-san said. "Without those, you don't look like yourself. Although," she admitted as she stood behind Miku and used pale pink ribbons to gather Miku's hair into its original style, "doing this probably contradicts my telling you to change your clothes..."

"Thank you very much." Miku gave Aika-san a small but polite bow, then looked at me. "Okay, let's go."

It felt like her eyes were urging me on, pushing me forward.

"Get going, Asano," said Jūhachi. "If you don't hurry, rush hour will be over. I think the guys following us are here, but you should be able blend in with the crowd and escape."

Aika nodded. "Jūhachi and I will keep out of sight, so you

two just need to worry about yourselves."

"I'm gonna analyze the hard drives we took and try to figure out a way to create a library from the ground up, just in case you can't find Somejima Otoha."

The two of them stood side by side, grinning. Less than an hour after escaping the building, they'd prepared us an escape plan.

"Got it," I said. "Thank you—both of you."

Even if we went, met Somejima Otoha, and were able to tentatively restore the vivid library, I wasn't expecting Professor Morisu to leave us alone once we returned to Tokyo. That said, living the rest of our lives on the run was an untenable plan. I had no idea what we'd do later on down the line—but for now, we'd go and meet this girl.

"Asano-san," Miku calmly suggested, "let's take the seven forty-eight Chūō Rapid Express instead of the eight o'clock Limited Express. The Limited Express trains stop at each station longer than the Rapid Express, so if, by some chance, they know we're heading for Kōfu, and we ride a Limited Express train, they'll have longer to find us at each station, and could cut off our escape."

Before I could agree, however, there something I had to know.

"Can I ask you one thing?" I said to Miku.

"What is it, Asano-san?"

It would be difficult to hear, but it was something I wanted to be sure of. "I don't want to have doubts about your feelings. You're an android that the professor created. Why, exactly, do you want to go against him and come with me?"

Miku closed her eyes in thought for a few moments, then

opened them and said, "I want to be of use to you, Asano-san. No matter what, I want to be useful to you." Although she said it with a joyless smile, she seemed like she'd come to some conclusion.

Aika-san was smiling too, as she began to speak. "Miku-chan, can I tell you something?" she asked, then went on. "Doing something for someone else has to be done for your *own* sake and doing something for yourself has to be for someone *else's* sake."

Miku's expression turned serious again as she listened to what Aika-san was saying.

"I know it probably sounds like a contradiction, but it isn't. I didn't always understand it, but now I do, and I want you to understand it too."

"...I understand."

To be honest, I didn't understand what, exactly, Aika-san meant—but her words had conveyed *something* and Miku was probably feeling a similar reaction to her words.

Miku and I left Aika-san and Jūhachi, headed to the Chūō Rapid Express Outbound platform, and got on the crowded train.

Our destination: Yamanashi Prefecture, Kōfu.

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[07/20 FRI 8:20]

After the train passed Mitaka, the crowds began to thin. Once we left Kokufunji Station, the number of passengers had decreased enough that Miku and I could sit down at last—side by side in front of a window, no less.

I felt like I could finally relax a bit. I peeked at Miku's face; she was calmly gazing out the window watching the scenery fly by.

After about twenty minutes of quietly riding the train together, we arrived at Takao Station.

"It is eight forty-five. Our connection will be here in eleven minutes," Miku informed me without needing to check anything. It seemed her geographical and time table data hadn't been erased.

"Thanks. Since we've gotten this far, we should be fine, right?"

"I believe there's a low probability that our heading to Kōfu has been discovered. If we'd been found out, I think they would've caught up to us already, so we're probably fine for now." Although Miku spoke logically, her tone unwavering, she also wore a tranquil smile, as if she were trying ease my fears. "Asano-san, please lend me your wallet."

"Huh? Why?"

"I'll explain later. We don't have much time until our connecting train."

Convinced by her resolve, I took my wallet from my pocket and handed it to her. Miku jogged off. Just then, another train pulled into the platform.

Miku returned just as the train opened its doors, as if she had calculated the timing perfectly. "Here," she said, holding out a sports drink with a smile. "Please drink this once we're on the train. You must be thirsty—we ran down so many stairs, and ran from Shinjuku to Shinjuku Station. Please, drink it."

"Th-thank you..." Sitting side by side on the train again, I opened the five hundred milliliter bottle and gulped down

almost half. My voice slipped out in an unconscious "*Ahhhh.*" Miku was right: I'd been extremely thirsty—in part because I'd been so nervous this entire time. I was sure there had been opportunities to buy drinks from a kiosk or a vending machine, but I hadn't noticed because I'd had no extra room in my thoughts. It seemed Miku had realized this for me.

"Is it good, Asano-san?"

"....." I felt like she'd asked something similar before. Was it when Miku ate ramen for the first time? "Yeah, it's good," I replied. "Thanks to you, I'll get through this without feeling parched."

When I thanked her, Mixu's expression relaxed into relief. "I'm glad I could help you."

So she wants to be useful, I thought. "You said that in Shinjuku too, huh?" I said.

"Huh? What?"

"No, I mean, you said, 'I want to be useful.'"

"That's right. I want to do whatever I can for you."

"Thanks. But you don't need to worry about me. Right now, I just want you to get back the memories you los—"

Before I could finish, Miku apologized mournfully: "I'm sorry, Asano-san."

"Why are you apologizing? *You're* the victim...*you're* the one who's lost part of their emotions! There isn't a single thing you have to apologize for—nothing at all. So don't!"

"I understand. I won't apologize. I'll do anything for you, Asano-san. Because that's what I want to do." There was a strong will attached to those words. Miku wanted to get herself back.

Before I realized it, the train arrived at Kōfu station.

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[07/20 FRI 10:30]

Miku walked out of the girl's bathroom at the station wearing the change of clothes Aika-san brought her. It was probably just to ease my mind, and unnecessary if our pursuers hadn't followed us here, but I thought it was better to have her change just in case.

"Thank you for waiting," she said.

I nodded. "All set? Let's go."

"All right."

We emerged from the station's north exit into weak sunlight, and found the sky covered in thick clouds.

I looked back over the note Aika-san had given me.

"Somejima Otoha. Address: Yamanashi Prefecture, Kōfu, xxxx-xx." Miku read over my shoulder. Then she said, "Continue down the main street for six hundred meters. Turn left on Yamanote Street and continue two hundred meters. Turn right at the Asashi-Gochōme intersection and you should reach your destination after a bit of a walk." Miku had lost something, but it seemed she could still use her geographical data.

"All we know is this address..." I trailed off. "I guess we'll just have to go for broke."

"I'll do my best to make sure you don't break," Miku said solemnly. I wasn't sure whether she understood the saying 'go for broke,' or had interpreted my words literally and thought my

body would be physically broken, but she'd nevertheless conveyed her worry for me clearly.

I was determined to help Miku somehow, and it seemed like she felt the same way about me—even though Miku was herself the one who going through this situation...

It was unbearable to think about. I absolutely *had* to return Miku to the way she'd been.

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[07/20 FRI 10:45]

"...Nasebe?" We'd followed Miku's navigation to the address written on the note, but the name on the nameplate was different.

Unfortunately, this address was the only clue we had.

I shook off my confusion and rang the bell. A woman in her late thirties answered.

"Excuse me, is this the Somejima residence?" I asked.

"...Is this the Nasebe residence?" Miku asked.

She was clearly suspicious of us, but I couldn't just leave now. "I believe a girl by the name of Somejima used to live here—do you know her? We're looking for her."

Her expression changed from suspicious to sympathetic. "No clue...We moved into this house six months ago, but I don't know who lived here before. I'm sorry." Her voice held pity. A baby began crying inside—most likely hers, or that of whoever lived there with her.

It seemed I wouldn't find out anything more no matter how

much I asked, and prying further would just inconvenience her, so I lowered my head and said, "I'm sorry for bothering you."

With a slight, regretful bow, the woman quietly closed the door.

"We've gotten so far just flying by the seat of our pants—to suddenly hit a dead end like this..." I murmured. I was sure my face looked awful, troubled as I was by disappointment.

Miku looked up at me. "The house number in the data that remained might have been wrong. It's also possible Aika-san made a mistake when she copied it down because she was in a hurry. We should try and search around here a little bit more."

Unlike me, Miku wasn't discouraged. *I* should be the one encouraging *her*, yet her attitude was encouraging me.

"I'm going to look at the name plates on the other houses around here," she continued, turning to begin her search. "Maybe one will have a 'Somejima' nameplate—"

At that moment, an elderly woman walking her dog stopped and greeted us. "Somejima...if I'm not mistaken it was around two—maybe three years ago?—that they moved to Fujimi."

"U-Um... may I ask who you are?" I asked.

"I've lived here a long time, and before they moved, the Somejimas were very kind to me." The sophisticated elderly woman smiled and gazed off into space like as if into a fond memory. "They would share their boiled meals when they made too much, and gave me tomatoes and asparagus from their garden."

Perhaps I was biased, but she had an air of trustworthiness about her. Maybe this was our chance. I decided to come

straight out and ask. "Um... If you happen to know the address the Somejimas moved to, I'd be really grateful if you could tell us."

The elderly woman gave me a rough idea of where their new address was as she pulled on her puppy's leash; it was barking enthusiastically and clawing at my shoes. "I'm so sorry," she said. "It was very sudden. They were kind enough to come back and tell me they were moving to Fujimi, but I don't know exactly which house number it was. It was all very mysterious, if you ask me. From here to Fujimi is so close that even these old legs of mine could get there in thirty minutes. I've always wondered why they went to all that trouble just to move *there*."

It *did* seem rather unusual, but I obviously didn't know the reason, either. Instead of answering her question, I thanked her properly, and Miku and I went on our way.

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[07/20 FRI 10:55]

Miku quickly told me the route to take to get to the address the elderly woman had given us. We walked side by side—or, rather, Miku walked like she was following me, and stayed a constant distance behind me at a diagonal.

Now that I thought about it, when we walked from Kōfu Station to the house at the address—not the Somejimas', but the Nasebes'—she stayed in that position the entire time, too. It was as if she was constantly watching over me while trying to stay out of sight.

"Miku don't walk back there, come walk next to...*hm?*" A water droplet hit my cheek.

It had begun to rain.

Immediately, Miku pointed to the bus stop a few meters in front of us. "It's only drizzling, but it's not good for your body to get cold," she said. "Let's go over there, Asano-san." At the stop was a bench where you could sit protected from the rain. We hustled over and sat down.

"Miku, coming with you has been a big help." I truly meant it. Miku had supported all my choices so far—and it wasn't *just* that she was here with me, helping me out. She was helping me mentally, too.

"Asano-san, please lend me your wallet."

"*Hm?* What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to buy an umbrella, so please wait here a few minutes."

"Wait... You say you're gonna buy an umbrella, but..." I looked around; there wasn't a convenience store nearby.

She said, "If you turn at the alley two hundred meters ahead, there's a general store. I'll head there."

"But you'll get wet."

"I'll be fine. I'm an android—my condition improves when I'm a little bit cooler." Upon saying this, Miku took a few steps into the rain, as if to say, "Look, nothing's broken; you don't need to worry." Her figure as she spun overlapped in my mind with the Miku who had danced around happily on that day in the sun shower. At the time, I'd thought her a bit strange for getting so excited over a little rain, but maybe there had actually been a good reason she acted that way.

Since she'd lost the vivid library, Miku had been reserved, obedient, and ever passive. That had changed today, when she woke up in that secret room. She was still just as reserved and obedient, but now I could feel an assertive will in her every word and deed. With her reaction to the rain, I thought it might be true that on the surface she was different, but it seemed Miku's essence hadn't changed.

"Alright," I said, "in that case, let's go buy the umbrella together." I moved to stand up.

"No," Miku said, decisive through her smile. "You're a human; if you get wet, you might catch a cold. I'll be fine, so leave this to me."

I reluctantly handed over my wallet. Miku ran from the bus stop looking pleased, and moving quite fast. Watching Miku's back as she ran off, I realized something: she wasn't just helping by assisting me. When we were together, it was as if Miku's feelings enveloped me. I couldn't explain well with words whether it was a sense of security or a sense of satisfaction, but either way, thanks to Miku, I felt warm inside my chest.

After a few minutes, Miku came back. Her clothes and hair were damp even though the rain was only a light drizzle. "Thank you for waiting." She held out an umbrella.

"Huh? Why'd you only get one?"

Without hesitation, Miku replied, "I'll be okay even if I get wet, so I thought it'd be better not to waste money." Miku seemed content when she opened the umbrella and passed it to me. "Alright, Asano-san—let's get going." She grabbed my shirt cuff between her fingers and pulled as she stepped out of the bus stop.

"I'll feel bad if I'm the only one under the umbrella. Come here." Gently grabbing the wrist of Miku's hand that held my sleeve, I pulled her next to me and began walking.

"B-but if you do this, your shoulders will get wet..."

"I don't think I'm fragile enough to get a cold just from that, *ha ha!*"

Beside me, Miku lowered her eyes and seemed embarrassed.

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[07/20 FRI 11:10]

The Fujimi area that the elderly women told us about was a twenty minute walk from the first house we'd gone to.

"This is it, Asano-san. This nameplate says 'Somejima.'"

We'd finally found it.

For a second, I froze with my hand halfway to the doorbell on the front gate. I wondered: how should I explain why the two of us had come here all of a sudden from Tokyo? Did Somejima Otoha know about man-made androids, or Hatsune Miku? If her parents answered the door, what should I tell them?

No, I thought to myself, *what good was hesitating any more going to do?* If they didn't know anything, then I'd tell them the truth. I'd tell them upfront why I wanted to see Somejima Otoha.

I prepared myself for the worst and rang the doorbell...

But no one answered. I tried ringing again, but there was still no response. I wondered if anyone would even be home this time of day.

"Asano-san, look," Miku called softly from behind me. She was standing in front of the mailbox.

"It's so *full...*" I hadn't noticed it when we arrived, but the mouth of the mailbox was overflowing with pamphlets and sealed letters.

Miku took the whole bundle out of the mailbox and began leafing through the stack.

"Wh-whoa, whoa," I started, "you can't just look through people's mai—" Then I shut my mouth; this was the only clue we had. We could wait here until someone came home, sure—but we had no idea when that might be.

"Super market ads, pizza delivery ads, mail-order catalogs, other forms of direct marketing...details on gas, water, and electricity usage...*Oops!*"

A single, sealed envelope slipped out of the bundle in Miku's hands and fell to the ground.

I bent down to grab it. "*Huh?* Independent Administrative Institution...Kōfu Seinan Hopsital?"

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[07/20 FRI 11:20]

Although I felt bad for doing it, I opened the letter from the hospital and looked inside.

It contained records of Somejima Otoha's hospital admission fee, and several months of treatment costs. Somejima Ototha must still be staying at that hospital.

If that was true, the reason they moved was most likely to have the family even just a *little* bit closer to the hospital, thus lessening the probably burdensome daily commute needed to look after her. The details indicated it was a long-term stay of several months. As soon as it became clear that Somejima Otoha had to be admitted for a long-term stay, the family must've moved from their house just a stone's throw away to make traveling back and forth from the hospital easier. If the family had gone out of their way to move, then Somejima Otoha must still be at the hospital. So after reading the letter, we left Somejima Ototha's house and walked to there.

"Thank you for waiting," said the woman behind the receptionist's desk, raising her head. "Somejima Otoha..."

My anticipation grew and my nerves with it. However...

"...She was transferred to another hospital in February."

"*Eh?*" I hadn't expected that. My mind was in chaos, and my impatience boiled over. "D-do you know which hospital she was transferred to?"

"I'm afraid I cannot provide you with that information."

I tried to question her despite my agitation, but all my questions were decisively turned down. My anxiety quickly disappeared, replaced with a sense of helplessness and sluggishness that made my body feel heavy.

The hospital courtyard was full of greenery, and a number of people who looked like hospital patients were taking walks and sitting on the benches reading, each relaxing in their own way.

I sat down alone on an open bench and looked blankly up at the sky.

The clues about Somejima Otoha, the girl the vivid library was based on, had dried up.

With nowhere to go, we remained, directionless, at the hospital. If I'd been forced to say why, maybe it was because I wanted to look around the place Somejima Otoha had spent her days.

"Asano-san, please eat this." Miku sat down next to me and held out a can of coffee and a sandwich. She had asked again to borrow my wallet, and I'd handed it over without thinking. It seemed that she'd gone to a stand and bought me something to eat.

"Thanks, Miku."

Miku's dedication was difficult to bear. Even though she had done so much for me, it seemed I couldn't do even a *single* thing for her. "You should've bought something for yourself to eat, too." My thoughtfulness didn't give me much comfort, but I had to say it anyway.

"That's okay, I..." she trailed off.

Looking at Miku's puzzled expression, I finally realized: we weren't doing the field test right now, so there was no need for her to eat.

Once again, I was hit with pity and shame that I couldn't even pay attention to Miku's needs properly. "That's right...sorry."

"Please don't worry about me. Instead, I think you should eat. You've gone over sixteen hours without consuming anything."

She really *was* watching out for me. And now that she mentioned it, she was right: I *hadn't* had anything to eat since the night before. I would normally be feeling pretty hungry, but—perhaps

due to the tricky problem that had hold of my mind—it was like I had no appetite.

I *did* need to eat, however. I didn't know what would happen from here on out, or when I'd be able to eat next. Because of that, and because Miku had gone to the trouble of buying it for me, I peeled off the plastic wrap and brought the sandwich to my mouth.

Miku looked on and smiled as if she'd been put at ease. "Asano-san, after you finish eating and take a short break, let's look at the other hospitals near here, since the receptionist said Somejima Otoha was transferred."

"That's right," I said. "Right now, that's all we can do."

"...There are two more large hospitals within a two-kilometer radius of here. Why don't we head to those two to start? I think I can still be useful." Miku again seemed to be basing her suggestion on the geographical data she'd been programmed with.

Nevertheless... "Miku, you don't have to worry about me like that."

At Shinjuku Station, and when she bought me something to drink at our connection in Takao Station, she'd said that she wanted to be of use to me. Moreover, after arriving in Kōfu, she'd helped me with what one might even call devotion.

When Miku still had the vivid library, there wasn't this kind of thoughtfulness and consideration. I wondered how it was that—even though a section of her personality was missing—she was still forming new behaviors.

"That's because..." Miku hesitated a few moments before

continuing. "I want to return to how I was originally. If I can meet Somejima Otoha, and import the vivid model into myself again..."

"I see...If you can meet Somejima Otoha, it'll all work out somehow."

"Yes. When Jūhachi accessed me unauthorized and I saw my memories, there was a counter-flow of information. Because of that, I was partially able to operate my self-referential logic."

Basically, Miku was now aware, to some extent, that she was an android, and of how she'd been constructed. She also understood what she was capable of doing through her own functions.

"Thanks to that," she concluded, "I now clearly understand my feelings."

"Your feelings?" Not her functions or construction, but her feelings?

"Yes. A little while after we met, I began to think that I wanted to do something for you, Asano-san. I didn't understand it at the time, but I do now."

Miku's declaration, and the resolution and lack of hesitation in her eyes, spurred me on. At any rate, we couldn't give up; we had to search for Somejima Otoha. While I'd been moving forward through the momentum of the situation itself, what had really gotten me this far was my resolve. Jūhachi said that the police weren't investigating our trespassing, but Professor Morisu had insinuated there was a sponsor for this research, and they probably had the power to organize people to try to find us. If we were found, then Miku and I would be separated, and we'd probably never see each other again. Before that happened, I wanted

to find the piece of Miku's emotions they'd erased. As I began to sink deep into thought, I heard a loud voice in front of me.

"*Oh!* Otoha-chan?"

".....?!"

"...Guess not, sorry." The owner of the voice, a young girl, quickly bowed and turned to leave.

"Wait!" I shouted instinctively, "Did you say 'Otoha-chan' just now?"

The girl stopped and looked at Miku. "She looks kinda similar, but it's not her. Sorry."

"Do you know Otoha-chan?" Miku asked the girl calmly, her expression gentle.

"Yup! We used to play together. A lot!"

"Do you know where she is now?"

I wondered why it seemed like Miku was accustomed to talking with young children.

The girl showed no sense of caution and continued answering Miku's questions. "Um...she said she was going to a hospital in Tokyo. She also said, 'let's see each other again,' so I thought Otoha-chan had come back."

"A hospital...in Tokyo?" Her words were so unexpected, I unconsciously echoed them. She hadn't been transferred to another hospital in Yamanashi?

I was confused and absent-mindedly avoiding meeting the girl's eyes when a mature-looking middle school-aged girl called out, "What's wrong?" and came to the younger girl's side.

"Well, I thought this girl looked like Otoha-chan!"

The demure-looking older girl gently chided, "Otoha-chan went far away and isn't here anymore, okay?"

"I know, you're right."

The demure girl turned to us. "Excuse me, but who exactly have you come here to visit?"

Her words made me realize the majority of the people in the courtyard were wearing pajamas. Miku and I—in normal, everyday clothes—were being regarded as visitors for a patient.

It was a bit difficult, but I quickly covered for us. "Um...Right, we're actually cousins of the person we were just talking about—Somejima Otoha—but we've lost touch... We knew she was admitted here—and then, before we realized it, we couldn't reach her anymore..."

"I get it!" cried the younger girl. "You're cousins—*that's* why you look like her, Oneesan."

Miku's appearance did a good job supporting my story, for which I was thankful.

"So *that's* what's going on," the demure girl said. "Otoha-chan said back around February that she was being transferred to the Tokyo Medical Institute Hospital. Her whole family moved with her to Tokyo because of that."

They'd all gone to the trouble of moving to Tokyo, I thought to myself. What kind of illness did Somejima Otoha *have?* The number of questions I had kept increasing, but right then, there was no time to think about them. "Thank you for telling us," I said. "We'll try at that hospital then." I shifted to stand from the bench.

"Oneesan, can you sing?" the young girl abruptly asked Miku.

I paused. "Huh?"

"Otoha-chan would sing for us. A lot of different songs. She was really good!"

The demure girl nodded. "She did, didn't she? Everyone always looked forward to hearing Otoha-chan sing."

My chest tightened at their words. Although the girls spoke of their own memories, I had those same memories. Theirs were of Otoha; mine were of Miku.

"I'm sorry..." Miku began. "I love music, but singing...I don't have the confidence to sing. But someday, I'd like to be able to sing beautifully like Otoha-san." Miku was smiling, but her expression seemed clouded with loneliness.

"Miku, let's head back to Tokyo," I said.

"Of course, Asano-san."

We'd ended up taking a detour, but Somejima Otoha was in Tokyo. Now that we knew that, all we could do was move forward. We stood from the bench and said our goodbyes to the two girls before heading off. When I looked back, the younger girl was still waving with all her strength. The demure girl stood watching us go.

When I turned back around, I could see Miku's slightly pained expression from the corner of my eye.

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[07/20 FRI 12:05]

We walked from the hospital back to Kōfu Station.

We'd only spent three hours in Kōfu, but we'd walked quite a lot. If we'd known at the beginning that we'd be sent to and fro around town, we might've called a taxi or gotten on a bus, but according to Miku, "The taxis here probably only look for passengers around the station. Also, there are fewer bus routes here than there are in Tokyo." As such, even if we used those methods of transportation, the time we spent taking them would end up about the same as the time spent walking.

When we got close enough to see the station, my cell phone started vibrating in my pocket.

When I picked up, Jūhachi's loud voice hurtled into my ear. "Yo, Asano! How's it going over there?"

"Somejima Otoha isn't in Kōfu."

"*Huh?* How come?"

"We found out she was transferred to a different hospital in February. She's currently at the Tokyo Medical Institute Hospital."

"What the heck?! So after all that, it ended up being a wasted trip to get out there. If she's at the Medical Institute Hospital, that means..." I heard the sound of frantic typing. "It's located in Shinjuku...It's pretty close to the building we snuck into this morning. I've kinda got a bad feeling about this."

"Bad feeling or not, we can't move forward without going there."

At this rate, continuing to run from the professor was all we'd be able to do. But no matter what was to come, sooner or later

we'd have to confront him. I knew the professor was still keeping his research a secret. If I could use that as an opening to negotiate, I hoped to somehow guarantee Miku, Jūhachi, and Aika-san's safeties.

"Yet another bold, out-of-character statement, eh? You're on a roll since this morning. But ya know, that means you're confident and reliable."

I didn't have the time right then to be happy about his praise. "How are things on your end?" I asked. "Does it look like you'll be able to recover the vivid library?"

"I finally found a lead on its basic structure. This thing is put together by drawing on a base-7 processor virtual machine. I don't know why, but seems like without that, I won't be able to access Miku to install it. The real problem is the library itself, though..." Jūhachi's voice faltered, which was unusual. "It doesn't look good. I'm looking into the fabrication procedures for the library hardware, but no matter what source I find it in, at the end it finishes with this indecipherable formula: '6Q+X.'"

"Even *you* can't understand what that means?"

"No clue. I feel like if I could just explain what the formula means based off my intuition, then it'll all work out, but I'm not even sure *I* can do that..."

"All right..." It seemed like we couldn't just rely on Jūhachi's results. "For now, Miku and I are going to head to Tokyo Medical Institute Hospital."

"Okay, then I'll go too; just the two of you might not be enough to handle things there. Let's contact each other when

we're close and meet up. How about the space in front of the I-Land Tower—sound good?"

"I'll come, too," said another voice on the line. "This ship isn't coming back to port anytime soon."

"Huh? That voice...is Aika-san there too?!"

"I came to monitor Jūhachi and make sure he doesn't slack off, *heh heh.*"

"All right, then," Jūhachi said. "When you know when you'll arrive in Tokyo, give me a call. Later!"

"I'm hoping for your safe return," Aika-san chimed in.

When we hung up the phone, Miku and I were nearing the stairs at the station. Suddenly, Miku grabbed my sleeve and pulled me back. "Asano-san, we can't keep going this way." Miku pulled me by my sleeve until we hid under the shadow of one of the pedestrian bridge's pillars. "Look," she said.

I looked out past the pillar toward the stairs. Two men in suits stood in the middle of the staircase, going neither up nor down, but instead surveying the surrounding area.

I ducked back behind the pillar. "Did they find out and come after us?"

"It seems that way," Miku said.

"What should we do? Make for the southern exit and get on the train from there?"

"There's a high chance there are pursuers inside the station, too."

"I see...in that case, we'll just have to try and force our way through." I knew it was impossible, but I couldn't think of another

way to go about it. We couldn't just give up here. Impossible or not, it was our only option.

"No," Miku said, "I'll search for a way to get us back to Tokyo without coming in contact with our pursuers."

".....?!"

There was a moment of silence as Miku closed her eyes and seemed to be thinking. Then she said, "From here, we take a taxi to the Futaba Service Area and get on the three forty-five highway bus headed to Shinjuku. Our pursuers probably won't be monitoring the highway buses as heavily." She'd most likely deduced this by consulting her geographical information and transit system data. Finally, she added, "Please don't give up, Asano-san. I'm going to meet Somejima Otoha, and I'm going to get myself back."

Miku had very calmly and concisely proposed an escape plan, but those final words felt so filled with emotion, they seemed almost like a prayer.

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[07/20 FRI 15:30]

Miku and I sat down on a bench on the Tokyo-inbound side of the Futaba Service Area on the Chuo Expressway. Thanks to Miku's discovery and navigation, we got on a taxi without being noticed by our pursuers; drove first in the opposite direction, as a precaution; walked a short distance before getting into another taxi; had the second taxi drop us off two kilometers away from

the service area; and, finally, arrived at the highway bus stop on foot. The bus was already standing by. We looked around, but it didn't seem like anybody was paying much attention to the two of us.

"There are still fifteen minutes left until the bus departs," Miku told me. "The bus is expected to arrive in Shinjuku at five thirty."

"Thanks."

For the time being, we had some peace of mind. We should wait here for the bus's departure time, I thought.

"Asano-san, there's something I'd like to buy..." Miku said hesitantly.

"I still have money, so you don't need to be nervous about asking. Here you go." I pulled my wallet from my pocket and handed it to her. Miku smiled with satisfaction and jogged off towards a kiosk. Immediately afterwards, my phone started vibrating.

I picked it up and heard, "Asano! It's me!" Even though he always spoke loudly, Jūhachi was shouting with especial urgency now.

"What happened? We just talked to each other—"

"Is Miku-chan next to you right now?" The difference in his demeanor wasn't only in his volume; he also sounded more rushed and panicked than usual.

"No, but she's buying something nearby."

Jūhachi's tone became more serious than I'd ever heard from him before. "I see...Asano, I need to tell you something. We've all made a huge mistake in our assumptions. "

"What on earth are you *talking* about?"

My hand holding the receiver was soaked with sweat. At the same time, I noticed dark splotches starting to speckle the asphalt in front of me.

"The library wasn't taken out. *It was replaced.*"

"What...?"

The number of black splotches steadily increased. It was rain. It had begun to rain again.

Jūhachi's explanation continued. "Now that I've dug up the data, I finally understand. There was an outbreak of critical errors in the central system that manages Miku-chan's 'ego.'"

"Right, and the cause of those errors was the vivid library, right? And in order to recover that, the two of us..." I shifted to see farther off, where the clouds stretching across the sky were growing lower and thicker, and the falling raindrops were getting gradually bigger.

"That's not right, though," Jūhachi insisted. "We misunderstood. We read it as seven libraries being implemented in her, and those libraries all working at the same time to replicate a variety of thoughts. But that's *not* how it works."

"What do you mean?"

Sweat kept soaking the palm of my hand.

"From the beginning, the libraries were structured to have only *one* library implemented at a time. The data showed that there were seven types of libraries, but that was just a record of all the different libraries that have been put in and taken out of her. That means that if we include this last time, Miku-chan's personality has been swapped in and out six times."

The rain was getting stronger, and though I was in the middle of talking on the phone, all I could see was the rain. "In that case, what we're doing now is..." I trailed off.

"The Miku you first met stopped existing the moment the vivid library was erased. And if you manage to reinstall the vivid library...then Miku as she is right now will be gone. It's not easy to say this, but..."

In a blink of an eye, a downpour began. The bench I sat at had a roof, so I wasn't getting wet, but I stared into the rain with unfocused eyes.

"Right now, Miku-chan is running on the 'soft' library. To be honest, I don't know if it's even possible for 'soft' to recover the 'vivid' library of its own will. But Miku-chan wants to, right? At any rate, there's still a lot about Miku-chan's structure that we don't understand. That's why it might be possible to do what we said initially. But either way, the 'soft' library recovering the 'vivid' library essentially means..." Jūhachi hesitated again.

The rain's intensity ratcheted up until it had created a film of water over the asphalt.

"...that in order to become a different Miku," he admitted, "I think she'll erase the current version of herself."

Miku had gone off to buy something without an umbrella. She was going to get soaked by the rain again.

There were several seconds of silence. Jūhachi didn't seem to know what to say, and was waiting for me to speak. "Well, regardless," I said at last, "if we stay here in Yamanashi we won't get anywhere—so we'll still head back your way."

"All right. When will you get here?"

"We should arrive at the west exit of Shinjuku Station at five thirty, so I think we'll be able to meet you at I-Land Tower around 5:45, 5:50."

"Got it. See you then."

When I hung up the phone, the rain that had pelted the asphalt was quickly turning into a light drizzle. It seemed to have been a severe summer shower that was just passing through.

When I came back to reality, Miku had returned and was standing in front of me. She was smiling, and held soft-serve ice cream in her right hand, with her left hand cupped over it to protect it from the rain. "Sorry for making you wait, Asano-san. The rain was so intense, I waited at the kiosk until it died down."

"Um...why ice cream?"

"Eating something sweet revitalizes the brain. I'm sure you must feel tired, so I thought a supply of sugar might be necessary. Here you go."

Her thoughtfulness was meticulous. "In that case, I'll gladly accept your generosity," I said. But I didn't understand why Miku would try to erase herself... "Miku, why are you going this far for me?" Wasn't it unrewarding? Wasn't it unsatisfying?

Miku answered with serene eyes that didn't give off a single sliver of doubt. "Because I love you, Asano-san. That's the only reason I need."

The only one with doubts was me.

I finished eating the ice cream just as it was time for the bus to leave. We boarded the bus, and it began its trip toward Tokyo.

I looked around carefully, but there weren't any passengers who looked like they might be following us.

I relaxed. On top of that, I had no idea what to talk to Miku about, so I stayed silent. I was also tired from staying up the night before—so as the bus rocked back and forth, I fell asleep.

While I slept, the bus got stuck in traffic caused by a car accident, which pushed our arrival time back dramatically. I was asleep until just before we arrived, however, and had no way of knowing this. It seemed that Miku had been worried about my fatigue and lack of sleep, so she didn't wake me during the trip.

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After disembarking, the two of us rushed to the meeting spot, the open area in front of the I-Land Tower.

We were *extremely* late. The cell phone Jūhachi gave me to keep in touch was out of battery—most likely due to how little time he'd had to prepare it in the first place—so I couldn't call to let them know we'd be late.

"Asano-san, I'm sorry for not waking you up," said Miku regretfully.

"Don't worry about it, Miku. It's not your fault." Despite what I'd said to Miku, however, I was plagued with worry myself.

"Asano-san...?" Miku's expression clouded still further with uncertainty.

It seemed my expression and tone of voice had given me away.

Then, as if she'd converted her feelings in some way, she put on a brave smile and said, "In any case...I want to hurry up and meet Otoha-san and return to normal. I think that's best for Asano-san, too..."

It wasn't that. I'd heard the truth from Jūhachi, and I was sure Miku understood exactly what "returning to normal" meant. Nevertheless Miku... "That's right. But Miku, I'm fine as long as you're happy. I want *you* to be happy."

"I want Asano-san to be happy, too. For that reason, I..." Beside me, Miku took my hand. "Is it okay if I hold your hand, Asano-san?" She gazed at me, bashful and shy, but didn't let go.

Instead of replying, I squeezed her hand.

Miku's soft, warm hand trembled ever so slightly in mine. Her cheeks were faintly flushed, and her expression seemed to verge on tears of joy. "Thank you... I'm happy..."

Even though our situation and mental states were completely different, holding her shaking hand like this while we walked brought back the feeling of that day, of walking together and holding hands down Takeshita Street in Harajuku.

The distance between our shoulders was the same, the pace of our steps was the same, and the affection and warmth radiating from our hands was the same, too.

I'd stopped being able to tell Miku that I wanted her to do this, or to be like that. I didn't *want* to say those things anymore. I wanted her to be not who *I* wanted, but who she herself wished to be. I would support her decision. I wanted to.

"Miku, no matter what kind of person you are, you're

absolutely important to me." The emotion-filled words spilled unbidden from my mouth, and didn't fit together properly.

Despite this, Miku nodded silently.

After we met Somejima Otoha, Miku would choose what she wanted to do. After that, we'd most likely confront Professor Morisu head on. We were past the point where we could run away; I had prepared myself for it.

Jūhachi and Aika-san were waiting in front of the I-Land Tower.

Despite the situation—perhaps out of relief at seeing the two of them again—I smiled as I greeted them. "Somehow, we managed to get back here without getting caught."

"Sorry for arriving so late," Miku said nervously beside me.

"Well, I'm just glad that you're safe," said Aika-san.

Jūhachi nodded. "But from here on out...I guess we'll be relying on luck."

I could see both their nervousness and Miku's.

I was nervous too, of course. Nevertheless, I didn't hesitate. "Okay, everybody ready? Let's go see Somejima Otoha."

When we entered the hospital only a short distance away, the lobby was quiet. It seemed the hospital no longer saw outpatients at this hour.

"Well then...I guess it's finally time for our meeting," said Jūhachi.

Aika-san said, "Let's ask the receptionist which room she's in."

We approached the receptionist's desk.

"We were told Somejima Otoha was admitted to this hospital;

we've come to visit her," I said.

The women behind the desk didn't say a word as she looked at us. Rather, she looked at something over our shoulders.

"You aren't going to be able to meet Somejima Otoha," a familiar voice said behind me. "That you've become this attached is completely unexpected. I am solely to blame for this."

I turned to find Professor Morisu standing in the previously empty lobby.

"Morisu-sensei, you're..." I had too many things that I needed to say, and while I fumbled to get my words straight, the professor continued talking.

"For the time being, the Hatsune Miku project will be wiped clean and started fresh. We'll have to redo everything from the very beginning. Even thinking optimistically, it'll probably take fifteen years before the project's completion, people's morals change, and society accepts artificially made human bodies. Still, even in the worst-case scenario, I'd at least like to do *something* about it while I'm still alive."

"Wipe clean and start fresh...what exactly does *that* mean?" I had nothing but bad feelings about those words, but I had to ask.

"We'll have to closely reexamine the correlative relationship between the library and basic structure, and construct a new, controllable design. We will scrap Hatsune Miku."

The word 'scrap' was so blunt, I stiffened for a second.

"I'm...going to...disappear?" Miku asked in a quivering voice. It felt like the hand I'd been holding this entire time had suddenly gone cold.

That may have been, however, because my own temperature was rising. I was suddenly so outraged, I could feel my face heat with ire. "That's not something that you can just *decide* when it's convenient for you!" I shouted, relying on that impulse and momentum. "Because Miku..." But it seemed I was too agitated for my words to come out properly.

Jūhachi roared with similar agitation, "You've *got* to be screwing with us! Why do you need to get rid of her? This is unbelievable technology, right? Me and Aika will definitely keep it a secret. You managed to get this far—isn't it more efficient to complete the research that Asano's *already* helped with?!"

This was supposed to be a hospital, but it was too quiet. Come to think of it, there wasn't anyone in the lobby but us. I noticed as I looked around that even the women at the receptionist's desk had disappeared at some point.

Professor Morisu frowned. "You're...Ishii Jūhachi, right? I heard a rumor that a year ago you were admitted as an excellent student in the field of information processing, but you dropped out for an illogical reason—so your little...*lecture* means nothing to us."

Jūhachi's anger was extreme. "Don't go judging me like that! I'm just doing what I *want* to do!"

Although the professor had shifted topics to Jūhachi, my head was filled with thoughts about what I could do to make sure they didn't erase Miku and how she could stay.

While I remained unable to gather my thoughts, the professor brought up a different subject with Jūhachi. "By the way,

Ishii-kun—since you went out of your way to risk stealing that data, I assume you did your own analysis, correct? Just for reference, what were your results?"

"The basic structure is a septimal architecture, memories and experiences are possible to back up and inherit, but the thought library itself can't be backed up. With that setup, if you input commands via the septimal code, then her emotions...what you all refer to as the EM value...*can* be controlled—*to a certain extent*. In addition, behavior suggestion is somewhat possible via a pseudo, post-hypnotic method. I looked at the code, but I couldn't find any of the commands that are always used with a normal CPU. So, this so-called 'failure' could understand that much."

The professor's face revealed some surprise—a rare occurrence. "Huh...It seems I misread you. You're marvelously capable. Such talent deserves better."

"Like I want to hear *your* worthless compliments right now," Jūhachi snarled.

"No, that's *truly* what I think. I said it because what you just said and what we know are, at a practical level, pretty close to the same." I was unable to distinguish whether the professor was gloating or making a sour face when he said this. "In other words, *we* don't fully understand the 'Emotional Growth Type Artificial Intelligence' that forms the basis of this project either."

".....?!" Jūhachi, Aika-san, and I couldn't grasp what he meant, so we kept silent.

The professor continued, "However, you three don't know how it came about. For the time being, it doesn't seem like it will

cause problems if I tell you all the things we've come to understand, so I'll give you this final lecture as a gift."

Aika-san glared angrily at Professor Morisu, and growled out, "You act like we should be thanking you, but your lecture will mean *nothing* to us."

"I didn't intend to sound condescending. Really, I should be thanking *you,* Shinosato-kun, for cooperating with the practical test—and although you acted against our agreed upon parameters halfway through, the results exposed a fatal flaw in the project. Ishii-kun showed us his hidden natural abilities, which suggests that a young, diamond-in-the-rough talent is necessary for the next project. Also...it goes without saying, but I'm also grateful to you, Kurose-kun."

Professor Morisu had returned to his usual demeanor. I couldn't let this continue. "Listen to me, Morisu-sensei!"

Professor Morisu finally looked at me. "What is it, Shinosato-kun?"

This was it. I fought down my nerves, and laid out all my demands in one breath: "Don't erase Miku's current thought library. Just keep charging her and swapping out her fluids, and doing the other maintenance that sustains her life, like you've done until now."

"I have to wonder why you're giving orders for our project.," Professor Morisu said. "I don't remember ever giving you the authority to do that."

Even though I'd expected the professor's reply, I couldn't just *agree* with him and back down. "If you don't do as I say, I'll share

this project with the press and put it on the internet. Don't you think that might be *bad* for you, professor?"

I was sure the professor was afraid of Miku's existence being revealed. All his previous actions indicated this was true. I was sure he'd have no choice but to think over my conditions.

After only a brief moment of hesitation, however, he asked me, with no hint of his usual airs, "What in the world are you saying, Asano-kun? What purpose is there in holding onto a malfunctioning piece of equipment with such care?"

Immediately after the words 'malfunctioning piece of equipment' left the professor's mouth, my body flung itself forward, and I'd grabbed the professor by the collar before I even realized I'd moved. "Take that back!" I shouted. "Miku's *not* a malfunctioning piece of equipment!"

But in the next moment, I was torn away from the professor, my viewpoint forcibly rotated ninety degrees. The cold floor rushed up to meet me; I was pinned down. When I turned to look, I saw the one holding my arms behind me and pressing his weight into my back was a man in a suit.

At around the same time, two similar men apprehended Jūhachi and Aika-san.

"Hey!" shouted Jūhachi. "What do you think you're doing?!"

"*Ah!*" Aika-san shrieked. "Let go! Don't touch me!"

From out of the corner of my eye, I also saw the two men who rode in the car that picked up Miku.

"You three know too much," said Professor Morisu. "I can't possibly let you leave. Therefore, we'll sequester you from society.

You'll live inside a building where you'll be completely cut off from contact with the outside world. Although your families will probably file missing persons reports with the police, they'll never find you, no matter how many years pass. The people that you know will give up searching before long. We can't influence the police, but as long as we have the budget, hiding three people won't be too difficult. That's right—and once society has accepted man-made androids as an everyday, common occurrence, *then* we can restore your freedom."

"What a selfish, egotistical little speech!" Aika-san snapped.

"Who the hell do you think you are, old man?!" spat Jūhachi.

Neither hid their irritation as they were shoved to the floor. I looked and saw the two men in suits flanking Miku, but not restraining her. That was the only bit of relief we had.

"Miku, run!" I shouted. "Get as far away from here as you can!"

Thinking calmly and rationally, it was probably pointless for her to run away; the only person she could rely on to exchange her fluids and charge her was Professor Morisu. But I wanted to let Miku be Miku for as long as possible—that's why I shouted to her once the thought came to mind.

But Miku stood stock still, like an empty husk, and made no attempt to move.

Then, the professor's 'lecture' began. "It all started twenty years ago at the Institute of Particle Studies in Ibaraki. At the time, I specialized in quantum mechanics, not androids."

"Are you just reminiscing at us?" Jūhachi scoffed. "Stupid. Pointless."

"Just listen. There's a proper order to this story. One day, when I was using a particle accelerator to repeat an experiment, I discovered an unusual baryon. Each of the six types of quarks was present, along with one more—an unknown baryon...all together, there were seven overlapping baryons—and I was the only researcher who noticed. This was understandable. It was something that hadn't been theoretically predicted, and the original experiment was for a different purpose. It would've been normal to treat the unusual baryon as an incorrect reading and forget about it. But I tried researching that theoretically impossible baryon, and came to realize it possessed unique characteristics after all. If you gave it an appropriate electrical charge, as a logic function, it would return values from zero to six. If you integrated multiples, however, it would be possible to create a septenary system computer, which could handle complexity to a degree incomparable with that of the widespread binary system computers used today." The professor pointed to Miku's face. "Her brain is in fact one of the septenary-system-based computers that I just described."

In all honesty, I couldn't care less about this lecture. Instead, while I thought intensely about what to do to protect Miku, I thrashed in a desperate bid to escape. Unfortunately, I was held down by superior strength, and I lay struggling in vain.

The professor's speech seemed to grate on Jūhachi's nerves. "Hold up," he protested. "Complexity because it's a septenary system? Rather than increase the *n* of an *n* numeral system to make it complex, you can make it a lot more complex by raising the accumulation rate in the binary system and gain velocity, right?

What you're saying isn't just strange—it's ridiculous."

I didn't really understand it, but Jūhachi seemed to be trying to hound Professor Morisu on an inconsistency.

Nevertheless, the professor stubbornly didn't break his lecture charade. "That's a good question, Ishii-kun. Of course, that wasn't the *only* reason. When the special baryon that I'd unexpectedly gotten ahold of performed a fixed number accumulation, it led to mutual interference, and I had to rewrite the original program I'd given it myself. Not only that, but do so in a structure that would actually run. It wasn't the kind of self-altering program that you often see, which adds modules but keeps the kernel as it is. It was a *self-growth program* that encompassed everything including the kernel—one that I'd rewritten myself. The deciding factor became that when this growth condition continued until there was a shortage of logical space, this baryon would *physically self-replicate and increase its logic element on its own*."

"Morisu-sensei," Aika-san said, scowling at him with contemptuous eyes, "I understand now that you have no intention of giving us an honest explanation. Physical self-replication? It's not like it can divide like a cell! That's a load of crap on a level I just can't listen to."

The professor continued, paying little heed to her accusation. "I believe I said it at the start, right? That we didn't understand it well ourselves. I don't know what kind of principle causes this phenomenon. We have yet to form a mere hypothesis, even now. This is in part because, for some reason, the quark included in the baryon exists in a similar state to the naked quark, and above all

because we definitely do not understand this 'unknown particle.' We don't even wholly understand its fundamental properties, so in any case, our suppositions can't be called scientific reasoning. Nonetheless, when I concluded that this particle holds a special characteristic that makes it extremely suitable for replicating the human brain, I shared the results with a small fraction of researchers that I could trust, and changed my field of research to prosthetics and artificial intelligence."

In other words, they'd skipped over basic research about something that they didn't understand well, and despite not understanding it, they looked into practical applications because it seemed like it would show the abilities that they wanted.

"Sixteen years have passed since then, which brings us to today. Thanks to the cooperation of those researchers, the advancements made in artificial human bodies is remarkable, and the joint researcher who specializes in medicine...he is a professor of brain surgery at this hospital. He joined our team, and thanks to him, we were able to gather base model data for the thought libraries."

"Well then," drawled Jūhachi. "Ain't it going well? It's disgustingly selfish that you just stole people's personalities to use them as models, but as research, ain't things going well? Why do ya wanna squander all that now?"

Jūhachi was exactly right. I didn't understand why they wanted to end the experiment. Going even further with that in mind, I asked, "What reason did you even have for developing an android? If you hadn't done this research, Miku would have

never have had such sad thoughts." And I wouldn't have suffered so much, either.

But on the other hand, I would never have met Miku.

"The reason for her development was, to put it simply, immortality and eternal youth. The group funding our research did so with that as their end goal. It's very easy to understand. As they are acting solely out of self-interest, this research was to remain secret. But as researchers, we thought we would make this system entirely fit for practical use and eventually liberate all of mankind from the fear of death. Not only that, but eternal youth entails brain cells that don't die off. If our intelligence continued to grow without any decline, we could attain more tremendous heights than we can even imagine. If these two things could be accomplished at the same time, then all our preexisting values would be destroyed, and the world itself would change. Wouldn't that be wonderful?"

Such a wild dream would normally be laughable, but the three of us knew about Miku—we couldn't laugh it off. The professor and his researchers had managed to do close to just that.

"Next, although I've gotten out of order, I will answer your question, Ishii-kun. We prepared seven personality libraries for our research, because it was apparent this would be a trial-and-error process."

"Don't say terrible stuff like that so calmly, you bastard!" Jūhachi shouted from where he was restrained on the floor. "What the hell's 'trial-and-error' about stealing people's personalities!"

The professor ignored him and continued, unconcerned. "When we moved on to try a demonstration, while error rates

were very low for numbers one through five, the detected emotions were also few in number, and the results were not to up to standard for what you would call a man-made android. Finally, after converting to number six, we saw more human-like reactions. That didn't even last one month, however, and this time, the error rate increased and crossed beyond a controllable range. You looked at that data too, correct? When the artificial intelligence exhibited human-like development, the increase of necessary emotions—the EM value—and the error rate had a proportional relationship. No matter how much we researched, we didn't understand the cause. Despite the abundance of human-like emotions, if you couldn't smoothly operate the artificial body holding the artificial intelligence device, it couldn't truly be human. On top of that, the accumulated errors started destroying the artificial intelligence itself. This is inconceivable among normal computers, but this one has the ability to rewrite itself, so therefore has the potential for this sort of problem. Number six clearly passed the error threshold. We tried every possible solution, but as you know, because the instruction set was insufficient, we couldn't bug fix effectively. And although in the early stages after conversion to number seven we suppressed the development of emotions, she still harbors strong emotions now. Therefore, Hatsune Miku *involved a fundamentally unsolvable problem from the very beginning.* The three of you proved this. You confirmed that even if we continue research from here, nothing will come of it."

Standing next to me, Miku's whole body trembled as if she was frightened.

The professor meant "Hatsune Miku" would be completely erased. They wouldn't restore her—now or ever; they would wipe this current project clean and restart utilizing another method. I couldn't let that happen. Even though I was physically restrained and immobile, I wondered if there wasn't some way to break the deadlock...

But I couldn't negotiate any more. All I could do was beg. "Morisu-sensei, I'd like to make a request once more."

"What would that be, Shinosato-kun? I would like to take your requests as a contributor into consideration—within the realm of possibility. After all, thanks to you, we were able to gather a good amount of data."

"I understand that Miku...that you have no more use for her." Just saying those words made me feel like my chest would tear asunder. Still, I had to continue. "I also understand the reason why you need to imprison me. I'll go along with that. However, I have three requests. The first is that you let Jūhachi and Aika-san go. They originally had nothing to do with this. If you feel like it's possible either of them might let something slip, you can use me as a hostage. Since you'll have me prisoner, you can tell them you'll kill me if they expose the project."

Jūhachi and Aika-san immediately tried to cut in with protests.

"Hey! What the hell are you talking about, Asano?!" Jūhachi yelled.

"I won't accept that bargain!" said Aika-san.

The professor merely replied, "A rational and appropriate

proposal. Let's discuss it. First, however, could the three of you come quietly to the hideout I've prepared? I promise that in the near future I will think over what we'll do with Ishii-kun and Kurose-kun going forward."

"The second condition," I said. "Let Miku meet Somejima Otoha. And third, please continue Miku's regular maintenance and support."

"Even if we do exactly as you ask, Miku will break down eventually."

"I won't let her! I'll stay with her! You can imprison us both together...If you do that, then the secret of this project will be safe. But Miku has a personality—erasing her is the same as murder!"

"We are the ones who created Hatsune Miku. There is no need for you to draw the conclusion for us as to whether she is human or a man-made object."

The professor's dispassionate reply made me all the more impassioned. "If you spent all your time with her, you'd understand! *Miku is human!* And if she can meet Somejima Otoha, she'll be able to recreate the vivid library. I don't know if I understood everything that you explained correctly, but isn't it *possible* that Miku has that power?"

"There is a possibility that if her self-extendibility operates selectively, a phenomenon like that could occur."

"I want to let Miku decide how she'll live from here on out. Whether she chooses the soft library she has now, or she returns to the vivid library...I want *Miku* to choose how to live!"

"Asano-san...you knew?"

The declaration I'd aimed at the professor pierced Miku's heart. But I no longer knew what I should say, or how to answer her question.

"I...I was so scared..." Miku said, vacant-eyed, "that Asano-san would know that I wasn't the Miku he first met...the one that he loved..." She continued piecing her words together deliriously. "That's why I...Before Asano-san found out...quickly return...to the vivid library."

I was finally able to speak, but it was no use. The feelings inside my chest were too strong, and I couldn't properly convey them with words. Finally, I shouted out with all my heart, "Miku, *you* have to decide how you want to live!"

But Miku kept quiet.

After a momentary silence, the Professor slowly opened his mouth. "...Unfortunately, there is no room for consideration for your second and third requests."

"*Why?!*" I shouted, still pinned to the floor. "I'll protect your secret! What's the problem?!"

"First, regarding your second request. I believe I said at the very beginning that you three won't be able to meet Somejima Otoha—the reason being that she's passed away."

"...Huh?"

"Think about it. Even though on the surface their experiences may differ, think about the risk of two people with the exact same personality existing at the same time. If the living person and the android that they were the model for were to come across the same situation, they would think similarly, harbor similar

emotions, and behave in a similar manner, correct? So, if both of them were to come into contact with one another, there is a high probability that problems would arise that would be difficult to resolve. That's why all of the thought libraries were taken from people at death's door. The low integration rate baryon chip was placed in the limbic system and taken out after a set amount of time had passed. In doing so, while we don't know the principle or mechanism behind it, the personality foundation was replicated on the baryon chip. Save for one exception, all of the people we used as models have died. We didn't kill them. All we did was take the personalities from *people who were supposed to die anyway*."

Somejima Otoha was dead?

The professor continued talking, but all I could do was lay there dazed and unhearing.

"And the reason that I cannot accept your third condition is because the troublesome situation of a man-made android being in the same place as their living model is happening right now. The model we used for number seven is Kurose-kun."

".....?!" Aika-san's expression immediately hardened.

"But you just said..." I thought to myself, hadn't he just said that in order to prevent problems from occurring they only ripped personalities from people close to death? What exactly did this mean?

"That's not possible..." Aika-san said in a wavering voice, as if her mind was in turmoil. "It's true that when I was in high school, I was admitted here with an incurable disease, but...but that's..." The usual Aika-san was gone.

"You were supposed to have died," said the professor. "When we duplicated the thought library, your prognosis was that you had one month to live. Since the human body does not function according to calculations, however, you miraculously—no, that choice of words isn't scientific. There was an *extremely low-probability change* in your condition, so in an extremely low-probability manner, you escaped death. We didn't intend to use your thought library because you're currently alive." The professor paused for a moment, as if waiting for Aika-san's reaction.

Her response sounded like a mixture of sadness and anger. She recounted her past as if it was being wrung out of her. "...even without being told, while I was shut up in this hospital, I had a hunch that I was going to die soon. The days were unchanging; the people I'd come across every day were the same. On top of that, I was going to die very soon. So I didn't want to have any unpleasant thoughts, or give other people unpleasant thoughts. And while I constantly tried to gauge the states of those around me, I tried to be the person that those around me wanted to see. Seeing the current Miku devote herself to Asano *makes me think about how I was back then.*"

A deep sorrow spread over Miku's face as she listened to Aika-san's story. "I...can't become vivid...Right now I'm a copy of Aika-san...I'm sorry, Aika-san...I'm sorry for being created," Miku said in a scarcely audible voice. I'd never seen her as depressed as she was now.

"Don't think that! That's not what I meant!" Aika-san said, denying Miku's apology. "I was lucky enough to get better, so I

decided to change myself. I decided that while I was alive, I would do what I wanted, the way I wanted. That's how I am now. That's why I'm different from you. I'm me, and you're you. That's why I'm wholeheartedly happy that we were able to get to know each other and become friends!"

Aika-san was right. Miku wasn't a copy of Aika-san. Miku had spent time by herself. She had spent time with me. Even though she first existed as an imitation of another person's thought library, the current Miku was already her own person, and wasn't taking the place of someone else. She carried a heart that was singularly her own, not anyone else's.

In the end, Miku was—for me—still Miku.

And that Miku—precisely because she *was* that Miku—was the one that I felt in love with.

Thinking I should say this, I faced Miku, but her pupils were as devoid of life as glass beads. They seemed to express extremely deep despair, and for a moment, I didn't know how to address her.

The professor's reply caught me off guard. "Shinosato-kun, I'm sorry, but your first request is the only one worth serious consideration. From the start, library number seven was a backup that we had no plans on using because Kurose Aika is still alive. Even *we* had something of a lingering affection, however, so as long as it wasn't exposed, we planned to keep the library active a little longer and increase the experiment data by what amount we could. After that, we planned to erase number seven as well."

"So...so that was your intention from the very beginning when you replaced Miku's libraries?!" I realized my voice was quivering,

although I didn't know whether the cause was anger or fear. I was once again being confronted with the clear understanding that no matter how far Miku progressed, to the professor she would never be anything more than a 'piece of equipment.'

"To go a step further, this experiment has demonstrated that if the original personality is lost, Hatsune Miku cannot perform the function of a replacement for that original. It's ironic, but this, too, is valuable data."

"Then...Miku is..."

"We will be conducting the disposal just as I explained earlier. There are no other alternatives."

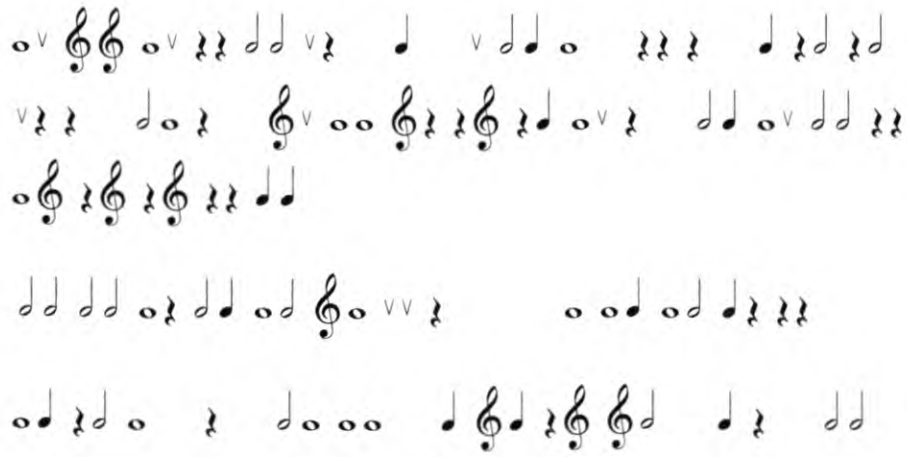
This must be what true despair was, I thought. I felt like all of the strength in my body was being drained.

I heard one last murmur: "What exactly was I supposed to be?"

I couldn't answer it properly. There was a ringing in my ears. A high-pitched ringing.

Before I knew it, the ringing changed intervals and a mournful melody began to play, so mournful that it made you wish you were dead.

Then, word-like sounds were added to that melody.



I finally realized: this wasn't a ringing in my ears, this was Miku's song.

I knew because while all that could be heard was a collection of meaningless sounds, the profound sadness they conveyed resonated in my heart.

When I looked to the side, I saw Miku's entire body glowing. The men in suits touched her in an attempt to subdue her, but they were thrown against the wall as if flicked away by a tremendous force.

Miku held both of her hands against her chest, and her strong singing voice rang out. Then, the walls of the hospital began to shine like Miku shone, and when that light went away, so did the walls of the hospital. Miku's song shook the room, irradiated the walls, and then made them disappear. The empty lobby quickly began to disappear as well.

It was a spectacle far too disconnected from reality.

It was a spectacle far too beautiful, and far too sad.

"What in the world?!" gasped the professor. "Decomposing and absorbing the subatomic units of the surrounding matter... The self-replication has entered a runaway state..."

"What the heck does *that* mean, old man?!" Jūhachi said, and though I was sure he was right in front of me, his shout sounded terribly far away.

"A phenomenon that was estimated to have a 382, 914, 611-to-one possibility of occurring *has occurred*—the baryon core swallows the surrounding matter and expands infinitely. Once it enters this sequence, both suspension and recovery are

impossible." It was the first time the professor had looked cornered. But for some reason I didn't stop and consider this—just listened to Miku's singing voice with the entirety of my being.

It was the first time she had sung for me since she became her current self.

It was a very mournful song, but her voice was so beautiful it felt otherworldly. *Being enveloped by this song and disappearing,* I thought, *wouldn't bother me at all.*

Miku's singing voice resonated even louder, and then the entire hospital began to disappear. The buildings next to the hospital, the buildings across the street, and the cars parked on the shoulder of the street all began to glow, then disappeared.

When I looked back at Miku, her body was bigger. She was growing gigantic, as if absorbing all the mass from the disappearing buildings and cars. Miku continued to sing and erase the city, grew taller and larger, and became so tall that her head peeked out over the skyscrapers.

I calmly lowered my gaze and saw Jūhachi and Aika-san's bodies were also glowing, and had become semitransparent. The suit-wearing men who had us subdued, and the professor, were glowing and had become semitransparent as well.

"What's happening to us?!" Aika-san shouted. "What the hell *is* this?!"

The men in suits screamed.

"My bo-body...it's disappearing! Pr-professor, do something! Help me!"

"R-run! Let's get out of here!"

"It's useless," the professor replied. "There's no way to deal with this. No matter where you run, it will be the same." He sounded as if he'd given up. I could see how pale he looked despite his semi-transparency.

"Old man Morisu..." Jūhachi drawled, "it seems you *overlooked* something."

"...and what's *that,* Ishii-kun?"

"Music...singing."

"How is that relevant?"

"Music interferes with the septenary operation code. There are seven fundamental chords—so if she starts singin' herself, the interference becomes even stronger. The self-modification, Miku-chan's growth, accelerates..."

"*Heh... Ha ha ha...* To think that *I* would fail to notice that... You really are...brilliant..."

"Nah, we're both...the same...even I... just now..."

No one could finish what they said—everyone disappeared.

I realized suddenly that my body had become pale and was glowing faintly. Strangely, I didn't feel any fear.

In front of Miku, I saw that all of the buildings she'd aimed her voice towards had disappeared. I could hear countless screams far away. Turning to look back, I saw taxis and other cars driving away at full speed. I could also see cars that had crashed into an electric pole and been abandoned. I saw people running away around those cars. When several patrol cars came closer, flashing their lights and blaring their sirens, Miku turned around.

Instantly, the patrol cars disappeared. Shortly thereafter, the

fleeing people and cars also disappeared, along with the screams.

Miku was going to erase the world. Anything and everything was going to disappear.

The school where we had class together, the Italian restaurant where we ate together, my room where we made curry together, Harajuku and the amusement park where we went on dates together... Everything.

Her singing voice didn't stop. Nothing stopped vanishing, either.

I thought, *pretty soon, the bridge where you would always wait for me with a smile is going to disappear, too.*

At that moment, Miku looked at me.

"I want to erase with Asano-san I don't want to disappear forever love disappear

song us Asano-san together I love but but"

Her broken words echoed directly inside my head. Nevertheless, I understood the feelings she was trying to convey with surprising clarity.

"So that's it..." I said, "that's how you thought of me..." If that was the case, there was only one thing I had to do.

I pulled close to Miku's gigantic body and gently touched her toe. When I did, my semi-translucent body became increasingly transparent and rapidly began to disappear. My vision was covered in a harsh glow; I couldn't see anything.

My consciousness began to fade...

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[--/-- --- --:--]

...I had no idea how much time had passed. It was like I'd lost all sense of time. I realized I was standing on a road, and that the road had familiar scenery.

It was the bridge where I'd always meet Miku.

Just like always, there wasn't much water flowing in the river, and it sparkled in the sunlight.

But Miku, who was usually waiting there for me, was absent.

I rushed off to look for her. I peeked inside the arcade that we'd gone to in the shopping district, but she wasn't there. I stopped at the supermarket where we had shopped together, but Miku wasn't there either. I arrived in front of Takadanobaba Station and stood where Miku had sung on the day of our date, but—nothing.

Suddenly I realized: in the shopping district, the supermarket, and now in front of the station, there were no signs of other people.

No one else was here. And neither was Miku.

From there I went to school to search for Miku. I rushed off at a light jog, and before I realized it, I was inside the lecture hall. The sound of my footsteps echoed in the empty room. I had walked several steps when the surrounding landscape changed, as if melting away, and I stood inside the silent, empty cafeteria. I looked over my surroundings once, and this time, without even taking a step, my body moved to the rooftop garden. But as expected, no one was there.

I wondered where Miku could possibly be. I had to find her and tell her something. I had to look for her.

That's right...she's probably there, I thought. I started to rush off again. But before I reached the edge of the rooftop garden, the garden path changed to wet asphalt, and I was in the residential area in Kōfu. Now I searched for Miku along the streets that she and I had walked together when we were looking for Somejima Otoha. Just as then, drizzle was dampening my cheek—but this time my body didn't feel cold, and I didn't experience the unpleasantness of being wet.

It was like I was wrapped up, protected, inside something.

"Miku, what *are* you?" I asked unconsciously. "You're the one carrying me to where I want to go and protecting me, aren't you?" When I spoke of her, the rain clouds parted and the sunlight shone through. The gloomy space was wrapped in warm light, and when I looked, the whole area had become an endless meadow. A multicolored array of flowers was in full bloom, and they swayed in the gentle breeze. Around me unfurled an endlessly expanding field of flowers.

And in the middle of the field stood Miku.

I greeted her as I approached. "I finally found you."

Miku turned. "Asano-san, you came to see me." She seemed very sad and lonely. "I tried my best. I always kept trying and trying to do my best. But it wasn't any use, was it...? It seems...I wasn't able to do anything..."

Her words and expression made my chest tighten. "That's not true, Miku. I had fun because you were with me, and I'm so happy I could meet you. Really, sincerely, thank you." I thought that from the bottom of my heart, and tried to put those feelings into

words to convey to her.

"But, Asano-san. I...am a toy made to imitate people."

A cold darkness descended, and when our surroundings grew light again, there were seven Mikus lined up in front of me.

"I was remade over and over again, but all I ever became was a toy imitating a person." All seven of Miku looked as if they were about to cry.

"...Miku, I have something I need to say to you," I told her. The moment had finally come. I wondered why I hadn't said this sooner. "I love you, Miku. I want to be with you forever and ever."

The Mikus' faces turned from sorrowful to bewildered. "Why? You know I don't work properly, right?"

My answer was already decided. The answer I'd finally arrived at inside: my true, honest feelings. "You don't have to mimic someone else. Miku is...*Miku!* And *you're* the one I care about! Not some other person. And you may not be human, but that doesn't matter! I love you, Miku!"

I finished all in one breath, and Miku smiled broadly.

But immediately after, her expression changed to confusion. "Thank you...but which 'me' is the one you like?"

I'd been certain from the moment I'd regained consciousness inside of Miku. "It isn't a question of 'which one,'" I said. "I love *Miku.*" I knew it wasn't logical. The seven Mikus in front of me were seven people—but they were all one. Their seven hearts had melded into one and enwrapped my heart. "Perhaps I've always felt it, from when we first met all the way up until now. Felt all seven of you standing here." Now I understood clearly. "You're

Miku because all of you are there. I'm sure that if even one of you wasn't there, Miku wouldn't be who she is now. That's why the Miku I grew fond of, and the Miku that I love, is simply...all of you."

The confusion on Miku's face disappeared, and she looked straight at me with eyes free of doubt when she replied, "Yes... they were left over. All of us. *The pieces of my heart*. And those became one. They become one, singular me."

The vivid that I had thought was lost wasn't erased. The soft that continued to show me kindness also wasn't erased. Normal, dark, solid, light and sweet: all the Mikus from before we met were also here.

"Asano-san, thanks for understanding," Miku said, finally smiling from the bottom of her heart. It was a splendid smile, better than any smile I had seen from any human up until now.

Nevertheless, I wondered why I hadn't realized it sooner. If I had, Miku wouldn't have been so sad.

"Asano-san...it's not your fault," she said. "Not at all. Even if it was your fault, my love for you would never change."

Right now I was inside of Miku. That's why my mind and Miku's mind had begun melding together. I quickly understood what Miku was thinking, and my thoughts were quickly conveyed to her.

However, I wanted to say it with my voice again, one more time. "I love you, Miku. I want you to be with me forever."

"Thank you..."

The seven Mikus began to sing. It was my first time hearing

this song—she was kind of scatting, kind of humming, and it was a song without any meaningful lyrics. But it was more than just the words that rushed into me, however—*everything* came into me like a torrent.

During her song, Miku stopped for a second and called out, "Let's sing together, Asano-san! I want you to sing!"

To be honest, I didn't have any confidence in my singing. But she'd begged with such a cheerful smile, all I could do was give in.

Feeling self-conscious, I joined my voice with the Mikus and sang. The gentle breeze that swayed the flowers now brushed across our cheeks.

What incredible happiness, I thought. If only this moment could continue forever...

Immediately after I thought this, Miku's singing voice changed. The tenderness remained but it became more powerful.

As if in response to the song, the wind grew stronger too.

"Miku, what happened?" I asked. "What's with this wind?"

Miku didn't answer, just sang with still greater strength. The force of the blowing wind increased.

I shut my eyes against the powerful wind, and when I opened them again, I was at the feet of the gigantic Miku.

"Why...? Why, Miku?! Weren't we going to be together forever?!"

Miku smiled, but didn't answer; she continued to sing. Then her whole body glowed, and the glowing particles started floating up into the air. I felt a foreboding that this was the end.

"Thank you, Asano-san... You've already given me so much. I

had so much fun because I met you. I was extremely glad to hear you tell me that you love me. I'm so very happy."

Miku grew steadily smaller as she emitted the uniform particles that steadily floated from her, until finally, she'd returned to her original size, standing right in front of me.

"I love you, Asano-san. That's why I have to return you to your world."

The Miku from when I first met her was there. The Miku who I last spent time together with was there. The Mikus from before I met her were there. All of them were contained inside this single, small girl's body.

I understood. Miku was disappearing from existence. "You can't do that!" I cried. "Miku...don't go...! Didn't you say you wouldn't disappear?" I embraced her then. I held her with all of my strength. I didn't want to let her go. Never.

"I have to say goodbye," Miku said. Her face was close to mine, and tears traced the edges of her cheeks. "I'm sorry. Thank you, Asano-san." Miku smiled as she cried. "And...goodbye."

I gently wiped her tears with my finger, and Miku reached a hand to my cheek and, in the same way, wiped my tears with her finger.

I realized then that I was crying, too. "...Thank you, Miku," I said.

I embraced her tightly again, but little by little, Miku's body continued becoming transparent.

Suddenly, the pressure against my arms was gone.

Hatsune Miku had disappeared.

When I looked up, the glowing particles Miku had given off had turned into thick clouds that covered the sky. I stood staring, motionless, as snow began to fall from those clouds. The sparkling precipitation piled up, and the buildings and cars that had vanished began returning to their original forms. A little way off, I could see the collapsed figures of Professor Morisu and the men in suits, as well as of Jūhachi and Aika-san. Soon, however, the newly returned walls of the hospital blocked my view.

The glowing snow fell for a little while, then stopped when the once-erased city had returned to normal.

It was all over.

Suddenly, I realized I felt something strange in my right hand.

I opened my clenched fist and found an SD card resting on my palm.

It was the SD card filled with music that I'd given Miku a while ago.

It was the last remaining trace of Miku.

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[08/31 FRI 16:35]

The research lab had no fresh air or sunlight coming in, just as always.

And like always, Aika-san and I were gathering data as a team.

"Now that I think about it," she said, "you've finally gotten your energy back, huh?"

"Oh, sorry for making you worry," I said. "I was just feeling a

little under the weather."

"There isn't anything 'little' about it when it lasts for a month. I already said this, but did you go get checked out at the hospital?"

"Oh, well, kind of..."

"It's not good enough to get looked at by some half-hearted quack," Aika-san said sternly. She gazed at me seriously. "Look at it this way: a while back I had a serious illness, too, so it may sound like I'm exaggerating, but you might *also* have an illness that needs to be caught early."

"*Oh!* Asano-kun," Machimura-san reprimanded, "Move your hands before you start moving your mouth!"

"S-Sorry."

"No, that's...please don't look so upset. You don't have to force yourself. If you're having trouble with your health—mental or physical—I can give you advice. Don't hold back, I can handle anything!"

"*Heh heh heh*," Aika-san cackled. "So it's true after all, Asano-san: Machimura-san's *interested...Hee hee hee!*" Aika-san covered her mouth and laughed.

I told you it's not like that, I thought to myself. But...this familiar atmosphere made me think once again about how everything had returned to the way everything had three months ago.

Aika-san and I were resuming our work when Professor Morisu opened his office door and stepped out.

"My friends," he said. "At long last—it finally goes on sale today!"

The associate professors reacted immediately, and the whole research lab swelled with applause. "Congratulations, professor!"

"The results of our research have been put to use for private applications and commercialized..." he continued. "This is a first-time experiment for our research lab. Depending on the sales, if we can transfer the generated influx of royalties towards our research funds, we'll be able to raise money for even better equipment and facilities. Please look forward to it." Professor Morisu left the lab followed by applause.

"*Hmm,*" Aika-san said, "I wonder what kind of software it is. Asano, do you know?"

"No...I think the only people involved were the professor, the associate professors, and some research assistants."

"I see. Well, at any rate, whether or not it sells doesn't seem like it'll affect us. More importantly, though..."

"*Hm?* What?"

"I'm sorry to bring it up again, but you should really get checked out at a big hospital within the next week. This isn't something to joke about. You might be in remission right now, but the next time you feel under the weather, it could be too late to get treatment."

I was being taken to task over and over again. "I-I get it," I said. "I'll have someone at a big hospital examine me soon."

But the reason I wasn't feeling energetic wasn't because I was sick.

More than a month had passed since that—since Miku disappeared.

That day, Miku had temporarily absorbed two-thirds of the Kanto Plain. From the time Miku began losing control until

everything returned to normal, satellites had captured what appeared to be a gigantic mist that covered the southern side of the region. Approximately fifteen minutes after the mist appeared, it cleared, and people and buildings returned to normal, as if nothing had ever happened. No one understood why all communications had cut off while the mist had been present. Dubious conspiracy theories abounded about possible causes—from a terrorist attack, or a new weapon from the American military. But in the end, the phenomena had been declared to be some type of geomagnetic storm—an unusual weather pattern with an unknown cause. Calling it a "geomagnetic storm" was logically absurd, but given there wasn't any other explanation, it seemed people were willing to be convinced by such nonsense for the time being.

Moreover, no one else remembered Miku.

Jūhachi and Aika-san, and even Professor Morisu, had forgotten her.

I was the only person who remembered.

We had only spent one month together, but Miku had undoubtedly been there, by my side. Even if no one else remembered, I wouldn't forget—and I'd needed the same amount of time we'd spent together to reach a point where I could think that way. I'd returned to the daily routine I'd had before I met her. I went from the research lab to the school cafeteria, where Jūhachi joined me. We ate dinner there and went to work together. I hurriedly made drinks at the club, and returned home at daybreak.

When I checked my cell phone, I had a text message from

Yoruko: "Is Miku-chan feeling better? Can I come by and hang out with you two again?"

Miku hadn't absorbed Yoruko that day, so she was probably the only other person who remembered. The matter particlization and reconstruction had spread throughout Tokyo and out into Chiba and Yokohama, but it seemed it hadn't reached the northern part of Saitama Prefecture.

"Miku dumped me," I replied. "If you can still come visit, if you want." I hoped my brief reply would be enough to satisfy her.

"That reminds me..." As the thought slipped out my mouth, I looked at the SD card lying next to my computer keyboard. I had tried as much as possible not to think about it, but this was Miku's memento.

I looked at what was on it right after everything happened. It contained only one file, with a "vsq" extension. No matter how much I searched for what the "vsq" file format was used for, I couldn't find anything. I gave a copy to Jūhachi and asked him to try and analyze it, but even with his ability and knowledge, he was unable to discover the nature of the file.

It was possible that such a file could only be opened on a septenary system computer. But all of the technology involved with Miku had disappeared when she did, so even if my speculation was correct, nothing could come of it.

That's why I'd tried not to think about it lately. But with Yoruko's text message, I got curious about the file on the SD card again, and for the first time in a long while, I entered "vsq" into a search engine.

"...VOCALOID?" I read. Until now, no matter how elaborately or deeply I searched, not a single hint had popped up online. Yet suddenly, I'd gotten a hit. It seemed "vsq" files were used by a newly released piece of software called "VOCALOID."

But Miku had disappeared and left this file a month ago. It didn't seem possible for her to have known about the existence of this software. In the end, the three-letter file extension probably just happened to be a coincidence... But even if that was true, I was still curious. I decided to go to Akiba first thing in the morning and buy the software. But I couldn't stay still. The sun was up, and the trains were running, so I thought I'd just head towards Akiba and wait until the stores opened. Decision made, I opened my apartment door—

"Whoa!" shouted Jūhachi. "I *just* missed getting hit by the door there."

Jūhachi was standing in front of me.

"What are you doing here at this hour?" I asked.

"Right back at you! Where are you going so early?"

"That's..." I couldn't give Jūhachi a real explanation since he didn't remember Miku.

When I hesitated, Jūhachi barreled on. "Well, anyway, I forgot to give you this after work!" Jūhachi took a box out of his bag. On the corner was a tiny logo that read, "VOCALOID."

".....?!"

"I found it today in the computer music section of a music store. It's a present! Lately, you've been kind of a downer. Also, I can't really explain it, but I felt like this software wanted to see you."

"T-thanks."

"Well then, I better be getting to sleep soon. I'll see you later."

I saw Jūhachi off, then became totally absorbed in installing VOCALOID on my computer.

".....?!" All of a sudden, a design appeared on the icon on Miku's SD card.

With a shaky hand, I started up the newly installed VOCALOID program, dropped the icon onto the design, and waited as VOCALOID scanned the vsq file.

Delirious, I pressed the play button...and heard a voice began to sing.

"My beliefs are just a mirror reflecting my recurring
delusions of a perfect world—
I want you to listen to my top speed farewell song."

The voice singing from my computer speakers was Miku's.

I was crying. I muffled my mouth and sobbed quietly. "This is where you were..." I couldn't stop crying.

Miku, who I'd thought had completely disappeared, had left everything behind here. All of Miku was loaded inside these unbelievably dense vocals.

This was a farewell song, but the song gave me hope I would see her again. "Thank you, Miku...I'm sure, someday..."

Someday I would see that smile again.

I was sure of it.

My beliefs are a mirror reflecting my recurring delusions of a perfect world.

In the end, our heart might just have been an imitation.

The things I protected are just a light upon an illusion of a shining, fading future.
Even my friends with will one day forget all about me.

And yet, inside of us, you sought us out.

And yet, music accepted us and our distorted state.

You were so very kind to this uncertain and unstable existence of mine.

But it comes to an end here.
The longing I felt for you all, and the longing I had for music.

I hope to sing again, I hope to be together again...
But those hopes have passed.

They've all vanished into thin air, been reduced to ones and zeroes; now the story has come to an end.

The proof I want to leave—that I was there—
Is woven into the song that I loved, for the you that I loved.

There isn't much time or capacity left...
So even though it will become dense and high speed...

I want you to listen to my top speed farewell song.

The story that binds this farewell isn't a bad ending.

Thank you, and goodbye...

AFTER STORY

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF HATSUNE MIKU

[04/15 TUES 12:25]

The bell rang; it was time for lunch.

"Kanase, let's eat!"

"Oh, Yue-chan."

It was a classic situation: the first friend I'd made since entering high school was the girl in the seat next to me. Yue-chan turned her desk and moved it closer to me. I turned my desk too, and placed it up against hers.

"Did you decide on a club to join?" Yue-chan asked as she ate her rice ball.

I stopped eating to answer her, a small, bento-sized piece of hamburger steak still held suspended in my chopsticks as I spoke. "I'm still on the fence about it," I said.

"You're into music—how about the light music club, or the wind ensemble?"

I definitely enjoyed music; ever since elementary school, whenever I had a spare moment, I was listening to something or other. I had tried to not listen to any music from the beginning of my last middle school summer vacation until my high school entrance exams, but found it really tough. "Light music or wind ensemble... Yeah, those might be a good idea, but they're sort of..."

"What? Are you worried you won't be able to make friends or something?"

That was certainly also true. I wasn't necessary *bad* at making friends, but I wasn't outgoing like Yue-chan, and I didn't think there would be a lot of students who were friendly like she was. I had a feeling that even if I joined a club, it would take time to

become friendly with people. That and... "I like listening to music, but I've never wanted to play it myself."

"That's true. Listening and playing are two different things, after all. But it might be surprisingly fun if you tried it, you know?"

There was some truth to that. I wouldn't know if it was interesting or not if I didn't at least try. But there was one other reason... "Hey, Yue-chan...are you going to cram school at all?"

"...Uh oh, you've got me there. You're a pretty serious girl—huh, Kanase?" She looked wholeheartedly impressed. "If you're already attending cram school, then you've basically already decided what college you want to go to, and are trying to prepare for that, right? I haven't even thought about a good college I'd like attend yet, so...I guess I feel like I can worry about going to a college prep school after I become a third year?"

"Oh no, that's not it," I said. "I'm not thinking about college or anything like that. How to put it... It's..."

"But if that's the case, then why go?"

I didn't really *want* to think about attending a cram school just a month after entrance exams ended, but... "The pace of our classes is a lot faster than I expected, and I feel like I'll be in trouble if things keep going like this."

The day the exam results had been announced flashed across my mind. I had been so unbelievably happy when I spotted my exam number. The school I'd ended up going to had been my first choice, too—that, and I'd wanted to wear its uniform. The design was cute, but not too flashy; it had class. But now that classes

had begun, school was quite difficult, and my good feelings had begun to wither.

"When you say 'in trouble,' you mean, like, repeating a year?"

"Ugh..." She'd immediately brought up the worst conceivable possibility, and the outcome I most wanted to avert. I *seriously* wanted to avoid that.

"Oh, are you worried because you didn't know the answer when you got called on in math class today?" she asked.

"Yeah, something like that."

Yue-chan smiled. "I'm telling you—it's fine! They don't make you repeat a year of high school over little things like that," she said, trying to ease my worries.

"Thanks. But even if I don't end up repeating a year, it would still be miserable to fall behind right after school started..." That's what I was *really* thinking.

"Well then, how about you wait a little longer and see how it goes? Like, until mid-term exams or something."

I could see what she meant. It would be better to see if my mid-term test scores were too low, and decide then whether or not to attend cram school.

"And you can hold off on joining a club until then, too," she said. "It sounds like it's hard to settle in if you don't join a sports club right away, but I'm sure that won't be an issue with the cultural clubs, right?"

"That's true. I'll do that, then." Thanks to Yue-chan, I now had a reference point: school mid-terms were in the middle of May, so I'd see how things went until then.

"By the way, do you have any time after school today?" she asked.

"Yeah, I'm not doing anything." I had no reason to rush home precisely because, as of then, I wasn't attending cram school.

"Actually, there's a club I want to check out. Will you come with me?"

"Oh, that's totally okay. Let's go."

We'd become friends thanks to our desks being so close, but I still didn't really know much about Yue-chan. I was curious to know what kind of after school club she was interested in.

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[04/15 TUES 15:30]

"This is the place."

There were many different club rooms lined up outside the school club building. Yue-chan came to a stop in front of one of the doors.

"...Film club?" I asked.

"Yeah, this is my first choice," Yue-chan said while knocking on the door. A thick voice from inside told us to come in.

We opened the door and found three male upperclassmen and two female upperclassmen all looking at us.

"Sorry for bothering you," Yue-chan said. "We're here for club observation."

"Freshmen?"

"Yes. My name is Momoi Yue. This is my classmate—"

"U-Usui Kanase."

Yue-chan really was outgoing...I always got nervous meeting someone for the first time.

One of the upperclassmen said, "Feel free to take a look around, and ask us any questions."

"Yeah, relax," said another. "We're a pretty laid-back club."

They seemed friendly. Thanks to that, my nerves began to settle a little bit.

"We're in the middle of editing our latest project. You wanna see it?" an upperclassmen asked, pointing at the two computers lined up next to each other at the back of the room.

"Thank you! I'd love to!" Yue-chan said energetically, stepping farther into the room.

I shuffled nervously and followed her.

"Wow..." she said. "This was shot from a *crazy* angle."

"Yeah. We used a step-ladder and had the camera pointed straight down."

Peering at the computer screen from over Yue-chan's shoulder, it looked like they were watching a video.

"Is this a sequel to the video that was uploaded last month?" Yue-chan asked.

"Oh, you saw that?"

"I did. I added it to My List right after watching it."

"Thanks. I'm happy to hear someone's watching the videos we've made. What did you think?"

"It was really good! Actually, not just that video—I also liked the video from last summer that you filmed at the beach, and the

video from the November athletic festival, too."

"You watched all those, too? Oh man, that's so exciting!"

I wondered what were they talking about, and what exactly the video was that they were watching.

One of the female upperclassmen approached me. "Uh, Usui-san, was it?"

"Yes." It seemed my getting left behind hadn't gone unnoticed.

"We're the film club, sure, but as you might expect, it's difficult to film real movies one right after another, nonstop—not to mention the fact that there also aren't that many film contests each year to begin with."

"Oh...I see."

"Because of that, doing stuff like this has kind of been the club's main focus for the past several years." While she talked, she used one of the computers, and the words "Video Rankings" and a large number of videos appeared on her screen. "Video sharing websites. Do you know them?"

"Oh...I've heard that those types of sites exist, but I've never seen one before," I said.

The upperclassman clicked the mouse a number of times, and a screen saying "My List" appeared. "These are all the short videos our club has made. We bought editing software with our club's budget, and have been making about one video a month, and uploading them here."

There were about forty videos queued on the list. "Wow..." I said. "There's so many."

"There *are* a lot, but this number isn't really all that impressive.

Nowadays, you can make a video on your phone, so anyone can just film something and upload it. Of course, we're still the film club, so we polish up the contents of each video many times, and we try to make a film that's thirty minutes or longer once every six months."

Another upperclassman behind me said, "Man, making the long film from the end of last year was grueling."

"*Ha ha ha!* That *was* exhausting, wasn't it?" agreed the upperclassman at the computer. Then she explained to me, "It was originally supposed to be thirty minutes long, but after we'd finished about half of the filming, the script was changed, and it ended up being a full hour."

"Since you're here, wanna watch it?"

"No, no, no, we can't show them that. If we spring a long video on students who're here on observation, they'll never come back!"

"That's fair, *ha ha ha!*"

I only understood about half of what the upperclassmen were talking about, but I could see they were excited and enjoying themselves.

"All right—let's have you watch a short one, then," said the female upperclassman. "We also make stuff like this." She clicked on one of the video thumbnails, and music began playing from the computer as a cute illustration appeared on the screen. The images moved and changed in sync with the developing melody, and then the vocals came in.

"Um, this is...?"

"A music video. Our school's light music club performed the music, and the manga club drew the artwork, so we put them together into a music video. Isn't it cool?"

I didn't know if it was a cover or an original song, but it was the type of song that I liked. In addition to the music, the illustrations moved in a good, matching rhythm. I gazed unconsciously at the screen, and then heard Yue-chan and the other upperclassman talking farther inside the club room.

"We've started doing some 3D stuff using freeware recently," the upperclassman was saying, "but it's been pretty difficult."

"Do you do any Vocaloid-type videos?" Yue-chan asked.

"Vocaloid, *huh?* I'd like to make a music video—it *would* be interesting to match it with images—but because the light music club plays music for their activities, they won't make a Vocaloid track. So, if we did it, someone here would have to learn to make the music..."

Other upperclassmen joined the conversation, making me think the club's atmosphere really *was* enjoyable.

"If we did that," one said, "then we'd start taking on more and more other activities. And ultimately, we're a film club, so I'm not sure that's really okay..."

"C'mon, c'mon, it's no problem, right? After all, movies are an integrated art form. Music is an essential element to filmmaking."

"You know, there's a really popular Vocaloid song out right now," said Yue-chan. "What if for now, we just made a video for that song? It's got a really great sound!"

"Oh, you're talking about 'Disappearance,' right? I like that

song, too. That's a good point...it isn't against video site etiquette to make a music video for a song that someone else has made—*and* it seems like it would be fun to try."

Yue-chan had fit smoothly into the conversation between the upperclassman before I realized it, and the upperclassmen seemed to have accepted her, as well. *Sure enough,* I thought—*people who share the same interests get along just like this.*

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[04/15 TUES 16:15]

"I think it was around my second year in middle school that I got into watching movies," Yue-chan said. "Then I started wanting to try and make something myself. And not even a movie, necessarily—I just wanted to *make* something."

We were walking down the street that led from school to the train station. Even though Yue-chan came to school on her bike, she always accompanied me to the station.

Yue-chan's eyes had been sparkling ever since she left the club room. I was sure she'd decided to join the film club. "There's a shocking masterpiece that got me into movies," she told me. "You should come over and watch it with me sometime!"

"Sure, I'll come over," I said. "I'd love to see that movie."

"Sounds good. I'll get some snacks for when you do! In my neighborhood, there's a small cake shop that's run entirely by one person. The Mont Blanc they have is simple, but strangely delicious."

"Isn't that expensive?"

"No, anyone can afford their prices. Oh, but it's hard to ignore Japanese sweets, too—stuff like azuki jelly and warabimochi. I could buy both, if you want?"

"*Ah ha ha,* it sounds like we're gonna be stuffed."

We arrived at the front of the station while we conversed.

"Thanks for coming with me for club observation," Yue-chan said.

"Oh, it's no problem. I had fun, too."

"I hope you do well on the mid-term exams so you can join a club you like, too."

"Me too. See you tomorrow."

A lot of thoughts came to mind when I left Yue-chan and boarded the train. Today was the first time I'd heard that Yue-chan liked movies. Not just watching them—she wanted to make them, too. I thought, *Good for you for coming across such a great club, Yue-chan.*

Meanwhile, what was I going to do? I had always loved *listening* to music, but that wouldn't help me find a club. I didn't really want to play an instrument or sing, and I'd *never* really wanted to, either...at least, that's what I *thought,* but...

On that day...

It was no use. I always stopped understanding things when I got to that certain point in my memory.

It had been on the first day of summer vacation last year.

I started morning classes the next day to prepare for my entrance exams. That's when I'd resolved to stop listening to music.

A lot of people listened to music when they studied, but I couldn't. Once I started listening, my mind would focus on the music, and I'd stop studying and keep listening until I got hungry, sleepy, or someone interrupted me. Since I knew this about myself, I thought I'd be in trouble if I didn't just give up music. That's why I'd decided to not listen to any until I was done with my entrance exams.

Upon making this decision, I filled up my MP3 player with the new albums I'd just bought and all my favorite songs, and on that first day of summer break—July twentieth—I listened to as much music as I could. Once I finished listening to the final track, it would be goodbye for half a year.

I had some free time, and rather than staying cooped up in the house all day, I wanted a change of pace while I listened—so I went out into the evening once the heat had let up.

Around a ten-minute walk from my house was a cozy little park that had a slide and a sandbox, as well as two sets of swings and see-saws. I was secretly very fond of the area; it had very wide benches, and a wisteria tree that offered plenty of shade.

While listening to music that day, I decided to take a break from my walk and sit down on my favorite bench. It was around dusk.

That's when I lost my MP3 player.

It was in my pocket, and my earbuds were in my ears. Nevertheless, before I realized it, both my headphones and the MP3 player were gone.

When I returned home that night, the news on the television was reporting, "Unusual weather phenomenon: A dense fog envelops the Kanto Plain." My mom was busy cleaning and making

dinner, and hadn't noticed it, apparently. "They said you couldn't even see a meter in front of you, the fog was so thick," she told me. "I'm surprised you made it home without tripping and falling." But I had no way to answer her, because...

I couldn't remember anything that had happened just before and after that event.

My mom was probably right: I'd walked around aimlessly through the fog, fallen down, and lost my MP3 player. The thing is, I didn't remember seeing any fog.

There was only one thing I vaguely remembered.

That evening, I'd had this feeling that made me think, *I want to do something.* Since the thought came to me as I was listening to music, it may have meant something like, *I want to try and play music,* or *I want to try singing.* But no matter how hard I tried, nothing seemed to fit.

If something in my mood had changed, I thought it must have happened while I was listening to the new record I'd bought, so after I got home, I tried listening to the CD again. But no matter which song I listened to, I couldn't catch ahold of that feeling of *I want to do something* again.

In the end, I wondered what, exactly, that feeling had meant.

Summer classes began the next day, and with them my days of focusing solely on my studies—so the vague and uncertain events of the previous day faded further from my thoughts.

But seeing Yue-chan today had made me remember. The truth was, I might have *always* been searching for the feeling I'd had on that day.

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[04/15 TUES 19:30]

"Dad, can I use the computer?" I called after dinner. He was watching television in the living room.

"*Hm*—sure."

"Don't look at anything strange, okay?" Mom said with a smile from where she was washing dishes in the kitchen. "Also, if there's any evidence that your *father's* been looking at weird things, you tell me, okay?"

"Okay."

I went up to the second floor and into Dad's room. Both my parents, especially Dad, seemed to trust me, and let me use the computer whenever he wasn't on it.

I turned on the computer and searched for the video-sharing website I'd seen at the film club. I found it immediately.

"*Um*...so I can't see videos without registering first, huh," I said to myself. "I'll just type in my email...there, that should do it." I wanted to properly watch the film club videos that Yue-chan had spoken so highly of during our club observation visit.

I searched the name of our school and the club came up quickly. "Ah! Here it is." It was just a five-minute video, but it had a proper story with an ending. *If* this *is the type of video a school club could make, high school really* is *something else*, I thought to myself. It was the right decision for Yue-chan to join the film club. I wanted to someday see the videos she would make.

"Oh yeah—there was one more thing..." I muttered. It was the song Yue-chan and the upperclassman had praised in the club room. The title was "Disappearance." I was curious and wanted to listen to it. "They *did* say that it was really popular right now..."

I tried clicking on "Ranking," and the number one video was called "Vocaloid Original Song—The Disappearance of Hatsune Miku."

"Is this 'Disappearance'...? Now that I think about it, everyone was saying 'Vocaloid.' This is probably what they were referring to." It was popular, it was a Vocaloid video, and it mentioned "Disappearance"—so I was sure this was it. I decided to listen to it.

I clicked the play button. After a few seconds—

Boku wa umare soshite kizuku
<I was born, then realized>
Shosen hito no manegoto dato
<In the end, I know I am>
Shitte nao mo utai tsuzuku
<A simulation, yet I will continue to sing>
Towa no inochi.
<My life, eternal.>

It was an incredibly fast song, unlike anything I'd ever heard before. Despite that, it felt like the notes were piercing my chest one by one. *Wait,* I thought, *wasn't this...?*

Yowai kokoro kieru kyozou
<My weak heart, the fear of deletion>
Shinshoku suru houkai wo mo
<As a newborn, I lack>
Yameru hodo no ishi no tsuyosa
<The strength of purpose>
Umare sugu no Bokuwa motazu.
<To stop the erosion and decay.>

I realized: this voice. I *knew* this voice.

Last year, on the first day of summer break, *this* was the singing voice I'd heard, the one I hadn't been able to remember until now.

Mina ni wasuresarareta toki
<When I have been forgotten by everyone,>
Kokoro rashiki mono ga kiete
<The thing resembling my heart will disappear,>
Bousou no hate ni mieru
<And seem like an end to my recklessness,>
Owaru sekai.
<An ending world.>

Vaguely, a girl's figure came to mind.

Incredibly big, and looking incredibly sad, but...

Demo ne, anata dake wa wasurenai yo
<But I will never forget about you.>

She seemed so happy as she sang.

A long-haired girl...

Before I realized it, the song had ended, and I'd zoned out.

What exactly was *that just now?* I wondered.

I played the song one more time, but the girl's face no longer appeared in my mind.

There was nothing but this mysterious voice—a voice that felt like it was trying to impart something.

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[04/16 WED 8:25]

"Good morning, Kanase," said Yue-chan.

"G-good morning," I said. "I have something I wanted to talk to you about."

"Something to talk about? What is it?"

"I was thinking about joining the film club, too, but..."

"Oh! What ended up changing your mind? Did you come to your senses after the club observation yesterday? I'm happy we'll be joining the same club, though."

"Um, it's not that I want to create videos..." I said.

"Huh? It's not?"

I could no longer recall the figure of the girl that had flashed in my mind. But in that moment, that strong feeling I'd felt—*I want to express myself...*

Last night, I'd finally remembered it—when I listened to that song.

"I think...I'd like to try Vocaloid," I told Yue-chan.

"Ah, I wasn't expecting that! But the upperclassmen yesterday did mention being interested in doing a Vocaloid music video, so I think you have a chance. Actually, you must listen to Vocaloid songs a lot then, right?"

"Um...yesterday was my first time listening to a Vocaloid song..."

"*Really?* What do you mean?" Yue-chan said. "This is a mysterious turn of events! Have you suddenly turned into a hard-working, go-getter type? Well, either way, I think it's great!"

"Thanks."

"By the way, is the thing we talked about yesterday okay now? What will you do if your mid-term grades are bad?"

If I really thought about it, it was strange that my feelings had made such a reversal in a single day—but I couldn't *not* think this way since, not since I'd listened to that singing voice.

"Yeah," I said. "I'll worry about cram school or college prep school once I'm a third-year student."

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF HATSUNE MIKU

AFTERWORD

What is Hatsune Miku to me?

Much like Shinosato Asano, I'm someone whose life has changed drastically since meeting Hatsune Miku, so there's no doubt she's an extremely big presence in my life. There are so many things I want to say.

Even though it's true that Hatsune Miku and the VOCALOID Engine were developed, that's not to say I had any hand in it.

I feel like it's a little impertinent for a normal musician, and Hatsune Miku fan, to talk about her—so although I've been asked to do interviews and the like, until now I often evaded them. But since releasing a novel to the world like this, based on one of my pieces, I thought I'd write something serious here.

Hatsune Miku has a variety of images.

Through producing verses, pieces, pictures, and videos, various images have been added to what Hatsune Miku is. So many people project their own imaginations onto her that her image is always changing. The image reflected can even change depending on the person who's looking. It's been almost five years since she was created, but during those five years, as time slipped by, the images and pieces that symbolized her evolved into something different. To me, it seemed like Hatsune Miku was eating those images, assimilating them, and digesting them.

"Digestion" is something that occurs only in living things, but it also occurred in Hatsune. She is definitely alive, isn't she? Whenever I come face-to-face with Hatsune Miku, the marvelousness of this delusion surges inside me. After saying all this to

someone, I'd usually just be mocked, which is why I'm writing it in this afterword instead.

Setting that aside, however, the final point of this type of fantasy is the "death" that is the fate of all living things. If the people surrounding Hatsune Miku stopped adding to her image, she would die—she couldn't help but die. Activity would stop. I think that would be a sorrowful event, similar to someone important to you dying. Taking that vague sadness and giving it shape resulted in "The Disappearance of Hatsune Miku."

That's right, the Hatsune Miku inside of me lives and dies, finishing a lifetime. While experiencing all the wild fantasies of the people who've grasped Hastune Miku, she lives, then dies. I'm sure it's that kind of existence.

Finally, when novelizing the idea of "Hatsune Miku as I thought of her," I had the cooperation of many different individuals, including the illustrator Yūnagi and the writer Agami Muya. I'd like to express my feelings of gratitude to everyone involved with *The Disappearance of Hatsune Miku* novelization, including the readers holding it in their hands and reading this afterword.

—June 19th 2013, cosMo@BusouP

AUTHOR BIO

cosMo@BousouP

A music creator who's been releasing music on the internet since the dawn of the Hatsune Miku boom. His uploaded creations have been played over 20 million times. In 2010, he released his first album, "The Disappearance of Hatsune Miku," from EXIT TUNES, which peaked at number six on the Oricon Weekly Charts. He's been praised for the unconventional and sensational stories within his songs.

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